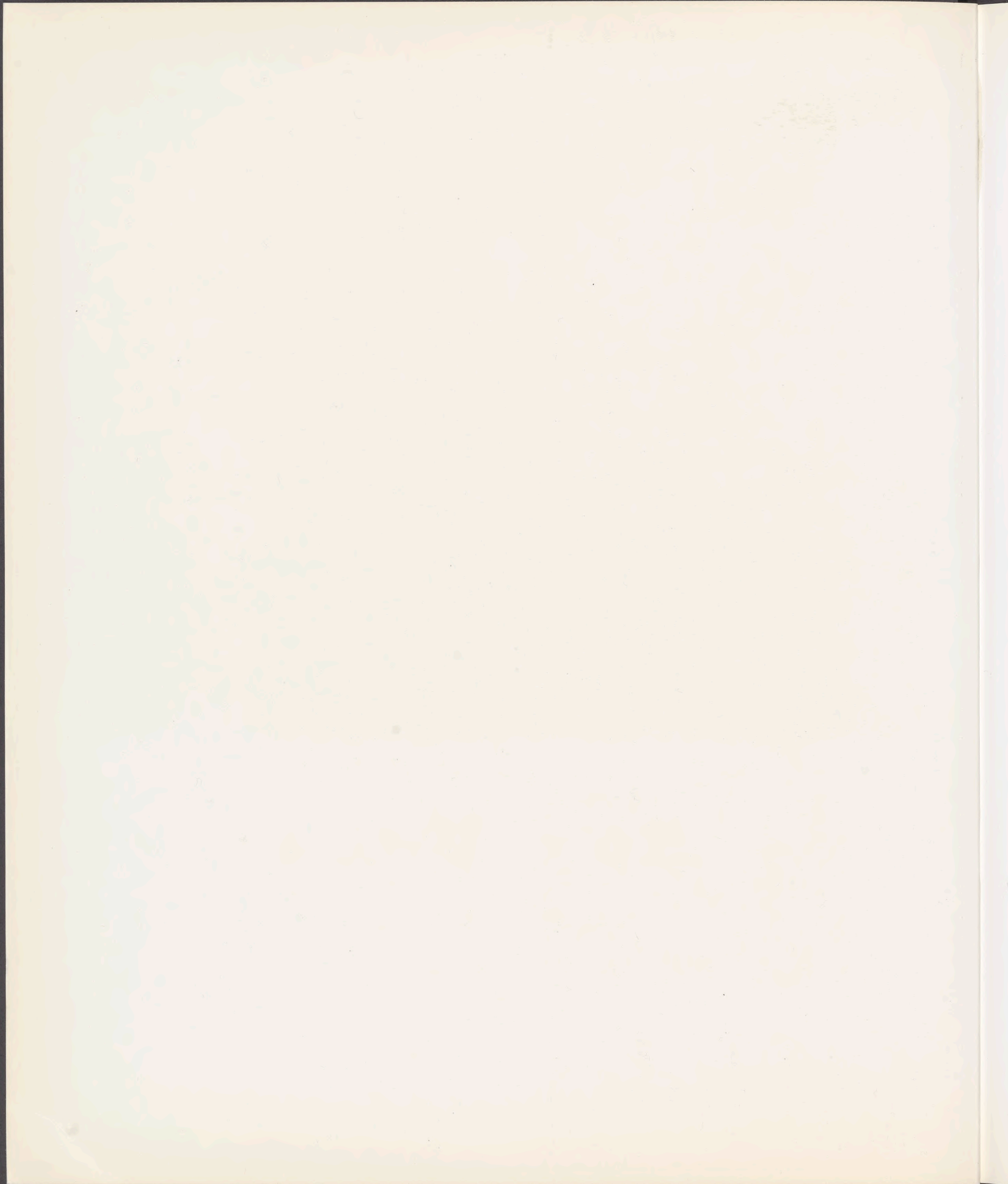




Roy DeCarava

A R E T R O S P E C T I V E

T H E M U S E U M O F M O D E R N A R T , N E W Y O R K



Roy DeCarava: A Retrospective



Roy DeCarava A Retrospective

PETER GALASSI

WITH AN ESSAY BY

SHERRY TURNER DECARAVA

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Published in conjunction with the exhibition *Roy DeCarava: A Retrospective*, directed by Peter Galassi, Chief Curator, Department of Photography

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Foreword

In 1950 The Museum of Modern Art purchased three photographs from Roy DeCarava, then a thirty-year-old artist who only recently had turned to photography. Now, in 1996, the Museum presents an exhibition of some two hundred photographs surveying the nearly five decades of DeCarava's work to date. Together, that early purchase and the present exhibition express the two central, reciprocal missions of the Museum: to respond alertly to new art, and to honor and study lasting creative achievement.

In serving both missions, the Museum's Department of Photography has been a pioneer. In its acquisition, exhibition, and publication programs the department has led the way for a young and still growing field. Among those programs, no initiatives have been more important than retrospective surveys of the work of outstanding photographers, which have provided the basic building blocks of the history of modern photography.

It is particularly fitting for a New York museum that this retrospective should be devoted to the work of Roy DeCarava, a lifelong New Yorker who has made all but a fraction of his work in his native city. The Museum of Modern Art regularly has exhibited his pictures in temporary exhibitions since 1953 and in its photography collection galleries since they were created in 1964. We are proud now to present a thoughtful overview of his long and distinguished career. I am pleased to add that, thanks to the cooperation of our sister institutions around the country, the exhibition also will be seen widely outside New York.

I am grateful to acknowledge that the exhibition and catalogue are supported in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. The grant is exemplary of the Endowment's essential role in recognizing and fostering excellence in the arts.

Finally, I want to thank Peter Galassi, Chief Curator of the Department of Photography, for his extraordinary efforts to bring this exhibition to life. His keen eye, sharp intelligence, and steadfast commitment to contemporary photography have helped shape the Museum's programs in photography for the past fifteen years. This publication and the exhibition it accompanies continue his interest in exploring and presenting the work of leading photographers at The Museum of Modern Art for the benefit and enjoyment of our many friends and visitors.

Glenn D. Lowry

Director

The Museum of Modern Art

Preface and Acknowledgments

The episode in American photography that began to unfold at the close of World War II is rich in artistic achievement. Its story cannot be told adequately without a full account of the work of Roy DeCarava, one of its distinctive protagonists.

DeCarava's only previous museum retrospective in his native New York City was held in 1969, at The Studio Museum in Harlem. That exhibition surveyed two decades of his work; it has been followed by nearly three decades more. Notwithstanding subsequent exhibitions in Texas, California, Sweden, and elsewhere, it is high time to take a good, long look at the entire span of DeCarava's work thus far.

That is the fundamental purpose of this book and the exhibition it accompanies. No exhibition that encompasses almost fifty years of an artist's career can hope to be comprehensive, but the goal here has been to survey the whole of DeCarava's photography, so that viewers widely diverse in outlook may enjoy and study it.

The core of the book is its nearly two hundred plates. In selecting and sequencing them, I have worked very closely with Roy DeCarava and with Sherry Turner DeCarava, an art historian who has studied her husband's work with great care. Although the sequence of plates is broadly chronological, it periodically violates chronology in order to explore the continuity of DeCarava's thematic and stylistic concerns.

If the range of DeCarava's photography has been inadequately available to the public, critical interpretation of the work has been still more scarce. Despite the early and sustained

enthusiasm of A. D. Coleman and the efforts of Elton Fax, James Alinder, and a few others, the essential literature on DeCarava's work consists of only a handful of items. By far the most illuminating study is Sherry Turner DeCarava's essay in the fine book *Roy DeCarava: Photographs*, published by The Friends of Photography in 1981 and now lamentably out of print.

Thus the principal aim of my introductory essay is to provide a general outline of DeCarava's career, which will be useful not only to those who agree with my interpretations but also to those who do not. In addition, Sherry Turner DeCarava has contributed an essay that ranges from an analysis of early, previously unpublished drawings to a consideration of Roy DeCarava's most recent photographic work.

Realizing such an ambitious project as this exhibition and book has required the skill and hard work of a great many individuals, from the people who frame and hang the pictures to those who keep the Museum running, from the people who produced this book to those who arranged the superb tour of the exhibition. Roy DeCarava, himself an exacting craftsman and an admirer of others who set high standards for their own work, joins me in thanking these people. He, too, regrets that they are too numerous to name here.

Among those who deserve special recognition are Elena Amatangelo, who scrupulously supervised the care of the nearly one thousand prints from which the exhibition eventually was selected; and Jo Pike and Melanie Monios, who, together with Roy DeCarava and Ron Carter, have organized a remarkable series of

jazz performances in association with the exhibition. Amanda W. Freymann, who supervised the production of the book; Tony Drobinski, who created its elegant design; Barbara Ross, who edited it; and Robert J. Hennessey, who made the excellent tritone separations from which the plates were printed, all made indispensable contributions.

I am particularly grateful to Sarah Hermanson, who managed every detail of the project, meeting each unexpected difficulty with unruffled competence. In addition to compiling the book's valuable exhibition history and bibliography, she did a great deal of the research that lies behind my introductory essay. I join her in thanking several people who went out of their way to assist her: Evelyn Daitz, The Witkin Gallery, New York; Pamela Tillis, The Studio Museum in Harlem; Tony Troncale, The New York Public Library; Kathleen Kenyon, the Center for Photography at Woodstock, New York; Jack Termine, the State University of New York Health Science Center at Brooklyn; and, above all, the staff of The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture of The New York Public Library, especially Michael Roudette and Betty Odabashian. In addition, I am thankful to the artists Beuford Smith and Carrie Mae Weems and to Romy Phillips, until recently a member of the Department of Education staff at the Museum, for their thoughtful advice; and to David Scheinbaum and Janet Russek, Scheinbaum & Russek, Ltd., Santa Fe, for their assistance in locating early DeCarava serigraphs.

Under the leadership of its founding chair-

person, Akosua Barthwell Evans, the Friends of Education, an ad hoc committee of the Trustee Committee on Education, offered welcome encouragement. The first event sponsored by the Friends, in January 1994, was a lecture by Roy DeCarava at The Museum of Modern Art.

My greatest debt, of course, is to Roy DeCarava and Sherry Turner DeCarava. The opportunity of an exhibition and accompanying book of this scale comes to any artist together with a demanding and often tedious intrusion upon current artistic work. Roy DeCarava has met that demand with great generosity of spirit. He and Sherry Turner DeCarava spent many, many hours with me, patiently talking about his life and work, sharing thousands of photographs, and considering every aspect of the exhibition and book. Their daughters, Susan, Wendy, and Laura, also worked very hard on the project. I am deeply grateful to them all.

Peter Galassi
Chief Curator
Department of Photography



Introduction

PETER GALASSI

Roy DeCarava has been making photographs for nearly half a century, at no prompting but his own. He always has lived in New York City and almost always has photographed there, creating from his immediate world the world of his art. He found his poetic voice almost as soon as he picked up a camera, in the late 1940s, and has never diverged from it.

At the heart of DeCarava's photography is an aesthetic of patient contemplation. It is common that we say to ourselves (or to others) that our lives would be richer if we could only slow down, if we could take time to savor and consider, if we would attend to our own backyards. DeCarava's work achieves this reflective state of grace, in the way he looks at the world and in the way his pictures invite us to look at them. He loves the luxurious subtlety of photography's infinitely divisible scale of grays, and it pleases him when viewers feel obliged to pause and peer closely into the dense but articulate shadows of his pictures. Having paused, the viewer has entered DeCarava's world.

The photographs are still and resolute. Often the people in them are themselves still or nearly so, their inwardness a reflection of DeCarava's contemplative frame of mind. Even a musician in a fury of improvisation and a worker straining with his load are full of poise in DeCarava's pictures, their powerful energies compressed in timeless potential. Often, too, the frame is compressed, as if to exclude the untended bustle of the world beyond.

Through its lyric concision DeCarava's work addresses the viewer with uncommon intimacy; its formal grace is a vehicle of deep feeling. No

one has ever made photographs more openly tender, and perhaps this is no surprise for an artist whose style is so gentle. But in the pictures there is pain and anger, too.

The emotional intimacy of DeCarava's photography is still more remarkable because it is full of social meaning: The expression of self is nearly always an expression of relation to others. DeCarava is indeed a poet of light, but what is most distinctive and compelling in his art is the seamless, reciprocal identity of the personal and the social, as if each of these opposing aspects of the self had deepened the other.

Roy DeCarava was born in Harlem Hospital on December 9, 1919. An only child, he enjoyed drawing and making things, and by the age of nine he had decided to become an artist. His recollections of his childhood read like captions to some of his early photographs:

When I wasn't in school I was on the street. The street life was very interesting for a child because there were so many things one could do. There were many games and a season for each game. There was a game called "skelly," which involved checkers laid out on a manhole cover to form a skeleton. We also played marbles—not knuckle marbles, that came later, but marbles along the curb, spinning and winning marbles. There was always a competitive element. During the kite season we would go up on the roof and have fights with kites. Each kid had a razor blade on the tail of his kite and would try to cut the strings of other kites. Of course there was

stickball. (Basketball at that time was a girl's game.) There was tops, and again that was competitive. You would learn how to spin the top and knock the other guy's top out of the ring. We also made things. We made our kites out of egg crates and as we got older we started making scooters out of roller skates—two wheels in front and two wheels in back and a plank in between. We made beads and necklaces. We made rings from peach pits, filing and polishing them against the curb. And there was drawing. As early as age five I was making chalk drawings in the street, drawings of cowboys and Indians. When we ran out of chalk we would use pieces of plaster.

And I lived in the movie houses, especially the Saturday matinee. I remember my mother used to spank me because I'd spend all day at the movies and I'd come home at six or seven at night. I am sure that the movies had something to do with my affinity for photography. I think I absorbed the visual aesthetic of black-and-white films, so that when I started taking pictures it was natural. I saw *The Jazz Singer*, the Garbo movies, the Douglas Fairbanks movies, *Tarzan*, *Westerns*. I was six, seven, eight years old. On Saturday you could go in for two cents with a Ken Maynard button. Later it went up to five cents. You stayed and saw the show over and over again, and sometimes there were three features, ten cartoons, and newsreels—the *Movietone News*. A lot of my emotional experiences came from my identification with the good guys against the bad guys, and of course the love stories. *Emil Jannings's The Way of All Flesh* had a tremendous impact on me because for a long time I was afraid I would wind up looking in the window at a family I had lost. It was a fear that stayed with me.¹

DeCarava began working at a young age, often for pennies—selling shopping bags in the market or newspapers on the subway, hauling ice, making deliveries, shining shoes—and he continued working through high school. For about a year he had a job after school at the Loew's Theater on Ninth Street in Brooklyn, cutting



1. *Stickball*. 1952

out letters for the marquee and lettering posters for the lobby. He had learned of the job through a close school friend named Alfonso Merritt, who became a professional sign painter, and whom DeCarava later photographed at work (fig. 2).

The realities of racial segregation and prejudice became ever more rigidly evident as a black child grew up in Harlem. By the time DeCarava reached high school, those realities were stark. At first he was assigned to the Harlem annex of Textile High School. The main school, on Eighteenth Street in Manhattan, boasted an entire working factory in the basement, where students learned to design and manufacture textiles. "The black students never went there," DeCarava recalls. "They went to the annex, where they learned absolutely nothing." After about a year, however, DeCarava and his friend Merritt were transferred downtown, thanks to the determined efforts of one of their teachers.

In DeCarava's recollection they were the only African-American students at the main school.

After the transfer DeCarava began taking classes in art history, in which he remembers discovering Vincent van Gogh and Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci. Before that, his knowledge of art had been confined to advertisements and illustrations in newspapers, magazines, and calendars, which he often had copied. At Textile, his sense of art blossomed: "That is when everything opened up for me. Then I knew what I was aspiring to."

DeCarava did well at Textile, and when he graduated in 1938 he passed an examination that gained him admission to The Cooper Union School of Art, in Cooper Square. There he continued his studies in art for two more years, but his frustration with racial prejudice was growing. Each day when DeCarava took the subway from his home in Harlem to school downtown, he entered a hostile world. In the long run the sympathetic personal relationships that he formed were no match for the pervasiveness of impersonal prejudice. In 1940 he left Cooper Union for the Harlem Community Art Center.

Now, the Harlem Art Center was a wonderful place. That's where I met all the young artists. The Center was on 125th Street, where the black community gathered. Paul Robeson had an office there, and Langston Hughes was a familiar presence.

DeCarava's mother had a clerical job at the Works Progress Administration, which she managed to transfer to him. Soon he found a position in the poster division of the WPA, where he learned silkscreen printing while continuing to study at the Harlem Art Center. This happy circumstance was abruptly interrupted by the war.

DeCarava's struggle as a black student in white schools was mild compared to the racism he experienced in the army. He had married, and his wife was expecting when he was drafted in 1942 and sent first to Virginia and then to Fort Claiborne, Louisiana, in the heart

of the Jim Crow South. The contradiction between fighting for democracy abroad while suffering discrimination at home angered many African-American soldiers in World War II, but DeCarava's experience was particularly traumatic. Unable to cope, he was hospitalized and soon was issued a medical discharge.

The only place that wasn't segregated in the army was the psychiatric ward of the hospital. I was there for about a month. I was in the army for about six or seven months altogether, but I had nightmares about it for twenty years.

DeCarava's mother had arrived in New York from Jamaica as the Great Migration of African Americans from the South to the North was transforming Harlem into a community of blacks. DeCarava himself grew up in Harlem as it became a ghetto; he notes that the streets he

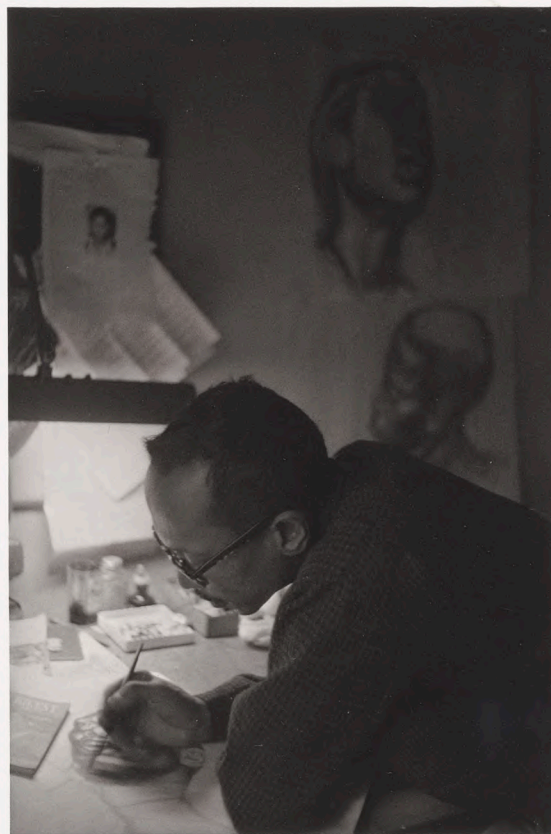


2. Alfonso Merritt. 1952

began to photograph in the late 1940s were much tougher than the ones he had roamed as a child. But the deprivations of the ghetto came hand in hand with the solidarity of the community in general and of the cultural community in particular. Within that community DeCarava forged his artistic identity.

Bringing together tens of thousands of African Americans, the Great Migration had assembled a congregation of talent and purpose that spawned the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. The glitter of the Renaissance did not survive the Depression, but the communal identity of Harlem continued to grow, and it nurtured the talents of young artists. Indeed, it was during the Depression years that an active community of visual artists first began to coalesce in Harlem. By giving work to black artists and by fostering institutions such as the Harlem Community Art Center, the Federal Art Program of the WPA played a crucial role in this process.

In the 1920s the cultural scope of the Harlem Renaissance had been limited for the most part to literature, music, and theater. The painter Aaron Douglas and the sculptor Augusta Savage had arrived in New York in the 1920s, and they had benefited from the encouragement of Harlem's civic leaders. But it was only in the following decade, after both had studied in Europe and returned to Harlem, that a vital movement in the visual arts began to form around them.² Douglas was the first president of the Harlem Artists Guild, founded in 1935 "to band all the Harlem artists together in a cultural group" and to lobby the WPA for jobs and relief for African-American artists.³ Savage's legendary generosity to younger artists made her a leader as well as a teacher, roles that took on a formal character when she became the first director of the WPA-sponsored Harlem Community Art Center, in 1937.⁴ A third artist who helped to create a collective identity for Harlem artists was Charles H. Alston, the animating presence at 306 West 141 Street, a former stable that became part home and studio to Alston and the sculptor Henry W. Bannarn, part work-



3. Charles White drawing. c. 1950

shop for WPA art classes, and part salon for Harlem artists and intellectuals. At "306," as it was affectionately called, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Alain Locke, and other literary stars of the Harlem Renaissance were as likely to show up as the younger artists who also frequented the Art Center: artists such as Romare Bearden, Robert Blackburn, Ernest Crichlow, Elton Fax, Jacob Lawrence, Norman Lewis, and Charles White.⁵

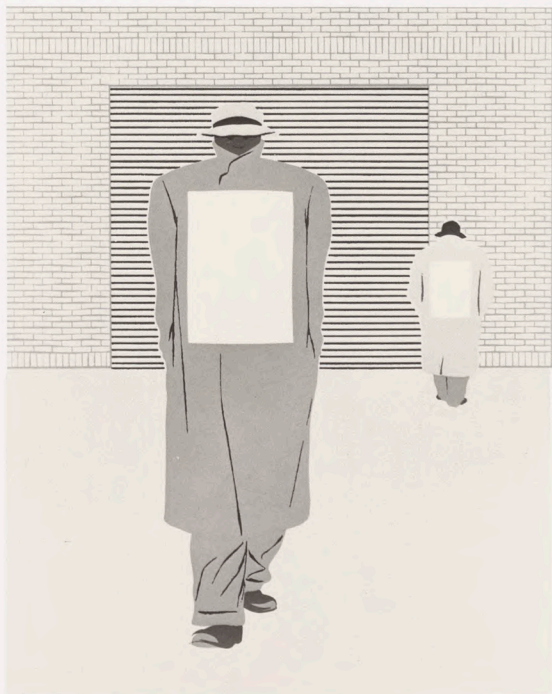
Because DeCarava eventually abandoned painting and printmaking for photography, his presence on the scene is omitted from the art histories of the period. A bit younger than most and a full decade younger than Lewis, he nevertheless belongs to the generation of artists listed here, whose collective concerns and enthusiasms he shared as a young man. Although (decades later) DeCarava grew closest personally to Lewis, he recalls that his deepest

early attachment was to White (fig. 3), with whom he studied painting and drawing in 1944 and 1945 at the George Washington Carver Art School, a program that helped to replace the Community Art Center, which had closed when the WPA went out of business. White preferred black-and-white drawing to painting, and his solitary, emblematic figures—a mother, a soldier, a worker, a musician—have an evident parallel in DeCarava's photography.⁶ DeCarava recalls being deeply affected by White's warmth of fellow feeling, his identification with "the mass of people who are disenfranchised and miserable."

In any artistic community a heated dispute is at least as common as a unanimous manifesto. Both dispute and manifesto focus the attention of the group, and a central concern in the Harlem art community of the 1930s and 1940s was the idea, form, and practical means of an art made by blacks, for blacks, about black life and history. The concern was not new to African-American culture, but in the visual

arts it took on an unprecedented importance and vitality just as DeCarava was graduating from high school.

In his influential anthology *The New Negro* (1925) and in other writings, Alain Locke, among Harlem intellectuals the one most concerned with the visual arts, had called for a black aesthetic in painting and sculpture. For Locke, this "racially expressive art"⁷ should be founded above all on African precedents. None of the Harlem artists followed this prescription narrowly; individually, each in his or her own way also drew upon modern European art (whose pictorial vocabulary, as Locke pointed out, owed a great deal to African art). But collectively the artists responded to Locke's effort "to promote and quicken the racial motive and inspiration of the hitherto isolated and disparaged Negro artist."⁸ DeCarava's own experience is typical. When the two were introduced in 1937, he was at first put off by Locke's notorious cultivation of dress and manner, but like other young artists, the street-wise teenager



4. *Strikers*. c. 1951. Color serigraph, 12 1/2 x 9 7/8 in. (31.8 x 25.2 cm). Courtesy of Scheinbaum & Russek Ltd., Santa Fe, and Anne Kurakin

5. *Close up*. 1949-50. Color serigraph, 9 1/2 x 11 5/8 in. (24.2 x 29.6 cm). Courtesy of Scheinbaum & Russek Ltd., Santa Fe, and Anne Kurakin

soon learned to appreciate the seriousness of the older man's program of racial identity and pride, and to make it his own.

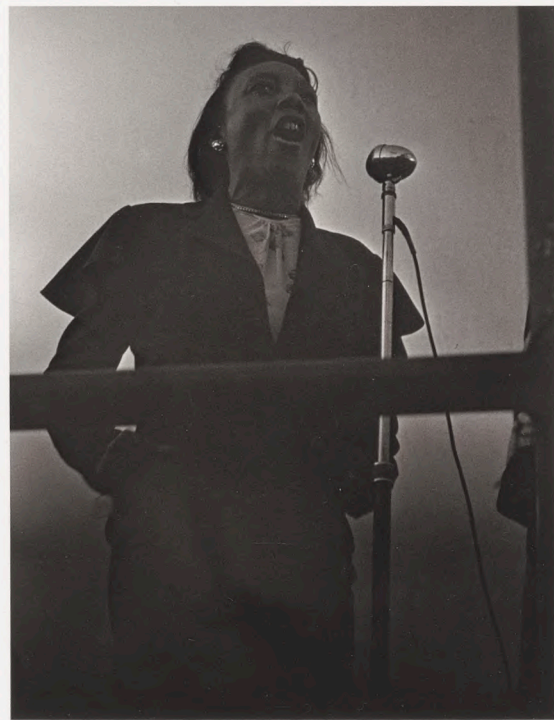
None of DeCarava's paintings of the early 1940s survive. Among those he recalls are a portrait of Harriet Tubman and the figure of a solitary slave, bound with rope. Such emblematic representations of African-American history were a staple of the new racially conscious Harlem art. Another vein of imagery, to which DeCarava's early photography contributed, was devoted to sympathetic depictions of contemporary black life, rural and urban, troubled and sweet, always expressive of social concern. By the mid 1940s, DeCarava had all but abandoned painting for printmaking, favoring serigraphy (silkscreen). In this medium he began to find a style that accorded with his talent. In 1944 he became a member of the National Serigraph Society. Two years later he won a prize at the important Atlanta University Annual, and in 1947 his first one-person exhibition was held at the Serigraph Galleries, in New York.⁹ Some of DeCarava's serigraphs do survive, and they take as their theme his Harlem environment (figs. 4, 5).

DeCarava welcomed the simplicity of silkscreen printing relative to painting, and it pleased him to be making works of art that members of his own community could afford. He notes that his prints were photographic—in the way that the frame acts as a cropping device, and in the way that spatial depth is telegraphed to two dimensions, without conventional markers of planar recession. DeCarava's silkscreen vocabulary of a handful of colors deployed in flat shapes invites comparison with the stripped-down style of Jacob Lawrence's gouaches of the 1940s, but the photographic feel of DeCarava's prints is closer to the work of Ben Shahn, whose photographs played an important role in his art, and whom DeCarava admired as much for the graphic verve of his style as for the passion of his social convictions.

Soon DeCarava began, like Shahn before him, to make photographs as a way of gathering

material for his prints. His first camera was an Argus A, among the least expensive of 35mm cameras that allowed the photographer to control exposure, and he built his first enlarger himself. Perhaps because his serigraphs were already photographic in style, his photographs quickly became more than sketches for his prints. One early photograph, of the civil rights protester Amy Mallard, was made as the basis of a print since lost, but it can stand on its own (fig. 6). Toward the end of the 1940s DeCarava decided to abandon printmaking altogether, in order to concentrate on photography.

By the time DeCarava turned decisively to photography, he had been earning his living for several years as an illustrator for a small advertising agency. Earlier jobs had armed him with considerable technical skill. At the agency he deliberately elected tasks that demanded precision over creativity, so as to husband his creative impulses for his own work, and he



6. Amy Mallard. c. 1949

shunned overtime as an intrusion upon his art: "I positioned myself so that I could function as an artist." DeCarava's clarity of artistic purpose is one reason why he matured so quickly as a photographer; his earliest successful pictures are dated 1949, and within a few years he had created a lasting body of work. Another reason is that DeCarava discovered in photography a working method and a pictorial vocabulary that were ideally suited to his circumstance and sensibility.

In the 1940s, the hand-held 35mm camera was fast becoming the standard instrument of ambitious young photographers, displacing the tripod-bound view camera of Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Weston. First established in Europe by André Kertész, Henri Cartier-Bresson, and others, the new aesthetic encouraged improvisation, since it required no advance planning beyond keeping a spare roll of film in one's pocket. By enabling the photographer to respond immediately to the world around him, the hand-camera fostered an art that explored the relationship of the individual to his social environment—an art, above all, of the city.

At the stroke of five o'clock, especially in the summer when the sun still shone, DeCarava magically could transform himself from a salaried employee into an independent artist simply by picking up his camera and walking into the street. He points out that the subway became an important early subject partly because each day he could count on his trips to and from work to give him a chance—on some days, his only chance—to make photographs. Perhaps this is why DeCarava's subway photographs are so full of allusion to an entire rhythm of life shaped by the nine-to-five day (pages 95–103).

DeCarava's conception of his work as a social art found a welcome environment in postwar photography. If the American aesthetic of the 1920s had been dominated by the cool precision of Weston and Stieglitz, the new wave of the 1930s was the photography of the Farm Security Administration—pictures by Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, and Russell Lee, among

others, which approached the individual as a social being and implied sympathy for the disadvantaged. Moreover, institutions as diverse as the Photo League, a leftist group of photographers in New York, and conservative magazines such as *Life* and *Look* also were enlisting photography as a vehicle for the expression of social values.

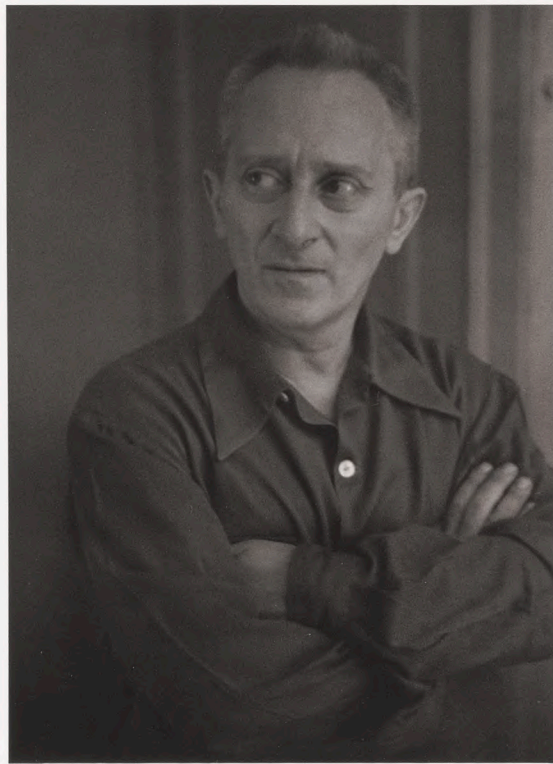
By 1950 the notion had emerged, impure but tenacious, that a professional photographer could be an artist also, even while working for the U.S. Government or for Henry Luce at *Life*. Indeed, by obliging photographers to confront a variety of subjects and practical challenges, the impurity of assignment work broadened the collective sense of photography's potential. DeCarava already had developed a fierce independence that made him equally wary of the ideological prescriptions of the Photo League and the corporate pretensions of the magazines. But, if his opposition to the compromises of applied photography helped to sharpen his artistic resolve, the liveliness of photojournalism in the postwar years enriched the hand-camera vocabulary from which DeCarava crafted his style.

The key point of reference, for DeCarava as for so many others, was the work of Cartier-Bresson. The Frenchman's taste for distant travel could not have been more remote from the New Yorker's exclusive devotion to his home town. But Cartier-Bresson's view of the man in the street as the vital embodiment of human values and cultures was deeply sympathetic to DeCarava's civic instincts. And DeCarava's artistic instincts were guided by the principle, nowhere more persuasive than in the work of Cartier-Bresson, that the immediacy of experience and the coherence of photographic form were not enemies but friends: that a photograph caught on the run can convey its message only if it speaks clearly. At mid century this principle was active in the work of such photographers of high talent and diverse sensibility as Helen Levitt, Louis Faurer, Robert Frank, Lisette Model, and W. Eugene Smith.

DeCarava's early photographs are eloquent

in their simplicity. Several show one or a few people seen from a distance, and thus as creatures of their environment: the streets and apartment houses and vacant lots of Harlem. However small the figures may be (or perhaps in part because they are small), our attention instantly is drawn to them, and it remains with them. Although we are distant, we feel close in spirit to DeCarava's people, whom he sketches completely as if in a few strokes: the confident stride of a woman in her Sunday best (page 76), the protective pyramid formed by a mother and her children (page 75). The latter photograph frames the family in the middle of the street, at the center of the world. Above them, the rooftops of the tenement blocks rise in gentle arcs, pliant shapes that recall the sweep of the striding woman's coat.

These pictures, distant in vantage point but intimate in feeling, are complemented by others whose vantage point is closer. Here we sometimes are able to read the expression of the face,



7. Mark Perper. 1951

but the psychology of these pictures is expressed as much through the posture of the body. Notice, in one picture, how firmly the man holding his infant child has planted his feet on the sidewalk (page 77). Often DeCarava contrives to draw his figures against a blank ground so that we grasp not only the sensual volumes of the body but also the crisp, linear silhouette it makes against the ground. The strategy works beautifully for a young couple in conversation (page 79), the young man's silhouette enhanced by the flare of his tie in the breeze. This graceful, plantlike shape, evocative of the fluid calligraphy of Arshile Gorky, recurs in DeCarava's art: a figure for the lilt of romance (page 157).

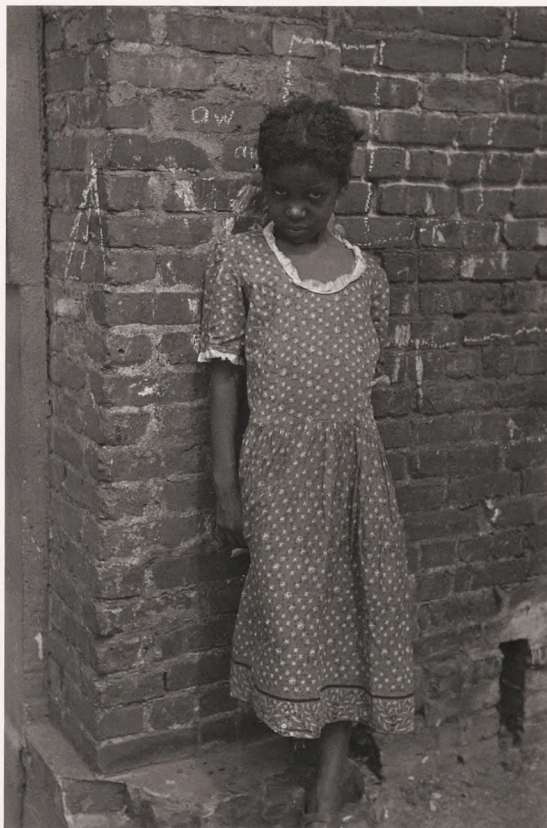
DeCarava presented his first exhibition of photographs in 1950. He owed his chance to Mark Perper (fig. 7), a painter who operated an uncelebrated gallery on West Forty-fourth Street, near DeCarava's workplace. Taken with DeCarava's pictures, Perper offered to show them, and the photographer produced an exhibition of 160 prints, crowded together in the tiny gallery. Perper was friendly with the young photographer Homer Page, a protégé of Edward Steichen. Page's response to the exhibition had a positive influence on both DeCarava's work and his career.

As a photographer DeCarava was an autodidact, and his meeting with Page was his first encounter with a seasoned technician. Their conversations prompted DeCarava to reconsider his style of printing. To explain the change, he points to an early photograph of a young girl in a dark print dress against a brick wall (fig. 8). He had been printing the negative to yield a conventionally full range of contrast, from brilliant white to dense black, thus rendering the picture brittle and harsh. After talking with Page he taught himself how to make the image cohere by printing it more softly, in a narrower range of deep tones, thus breathing space and life into a luxury of dark grays. The lesson was essential to the development of DeCarava's aesthetic, and, while he would have learned it soon enough on his own, he remains grateful to Page.

First persuading DeCarava to edit his unwieldy exhibition to about thirty prints, Page then introduced him to Steichen, who had taken charge of the Department of Photography at The Museum of Modern Art in 1947. Steichen welcomed DeCarava with open arms, drawing on the Museum's Nelson Rockefeller Fund to purchase three prints for the Museum, at \$50 each.¹⁰ Soon he began including DeCarava's work in group exhibitions. Steichen's own long career as a photographer had earned him enormous prestige, and from his position at the Museum he wielded unparalleled influence in the field. His encouragement and support were instrumental in winning for DeCarava a Fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, in 1952.¹¹ DeCarava was the first African-American photographer to win the Fellowship.

The Guggenheim Fellowship was designed to give a talented young person the freedom to pursue initial promise, and that is precisely what it did for DeCarava. The award of \$3,500, paid in installments beginning in April 1952, was less than his annual salary, but it enabled him to take a year's leave of absence from his job. As this excerpt from his Guggenheim proposal suggests, DeCarava, then thirty-two, was prepared for the opportunity:

I want to photograph Harlem through the Negro people. Morning, noon, night, at work, going to work, coming home from work, at play, in the streets, talking, kidding, laughing, in the home, in the playgrounds, in the schools, bars, stores, libraries, beauty parlors, churches, etc. . . . I want to show the strength, the wisdom, the dignity of the Negro people. Not the famous and the well known, but the unknown and the unnamed, thus revealing the roots from which spring the greatness of all human beings. . . . I do not want a documentary or sociological statement, I want a creative expression, the kind of penetrating insight and understanding of Negroes which I believe only a Negro photographer can interpret. I want to heighten the awareness of my people and bring to our consciousness a greater knowledge of our heritage.



8. *Girl in print dress. 1949-50*

Hand-camera photography is simple and quick, but even by a generous estimate of conventional standards DeCarava's output in 1952 and 1953 is enormous. Although he did not quite achieve the panoramic scope suggested in his proposal—there do not appear to be any pictures made in schools or libraries or churches—DeCarava did survey the range of Harlem life: people at play, at work, in the parks and subways, young and old. There are pictures of a parade, of people singing and dancing, and of the preachers and protesters who had been a regular feature of Harlem street life since the heyday of Marcus Garvey's Back-to-Africa movement, in the 1920s.

But the most original pictures were made behind closed doors. Some of them were made in the workshop of DeCarava's school companion, the sign painter Alfonso Merritt, a place where a large circle of friends frequently gathered. Best of all are the pictures made in peo-



9. Langston Hughes. 1954

ple's homes, especially the homes of two families: Sam and Shirley Murphy and their two children (see pages 82, 91–93) and Joe and Julia James and their five children (see pages 80, 88–90). DeCarava spent many hours with these families, and it is obvious that they were happy to have him. He made no effort to disguise the poverty of his friends or to make them seem noble or heroic. But he distilled from their lives an elixir of affection, which permeates the pictures themselves. The photographs address the people in them with the same gentleness and warmth that they accord to each other.

Photography had never seen such pictures—pictures at once so unsentimental, so sensual, so intimate, and so tender. DeCarava had set out to fill a gaping hole in the world's image of Harlem: its image of itself. In succeeding, he captured the most delicate qualities of domestic life, black or white. Pundits at the Photo League and other earnest proponents of documentary photography repeatedly had insisted that photographers must win the confidence of their subjects;

otherwise their pictures were destined to be superficial. The principle, of course, assumed that the photographer began as an outsider. DeCarava was an insider; he had only to be himself to see Harlem from within.¹²

The text of DeCarava's Guggenheim proposal could have come from the pen of Langston Hughes. The alloy of pride and determination, affection and seriousness, social conscience and artistic ambition, was characteristic of Hughes. For decades he had been both prolific as an artist and tireless as a social activist, and by the early 1950s, he had come to personify, perhaps more than any other single figure, the warmth of fellow feeling that Harlem residents instinctively granted to each other, whether they knew each other or not. If DeCarava's portrait of Hughes imprisoned by a metal grate alludes to the activist's struggle against discrimination (fig. 9), his photograph of Hughes surrounded by neighborhood children (fig. 10) suggests what the poet meant when he wrote, "I would rather have a kitchenette in Harlem than a mansion in Westchester."¹³ Jesse B. Semple, or Simple, Hughes's imaginary drinking partner and alter ego, gave this succinct historical explanation of why he felt at home in Harlem:

*The white race drug me over here from Africa, slaved me, freed me, lynched me, starved me during the depression, Jim Crowed me during the war—then they come talking about they is scared of me! Which is why I am glad I have got one spot to call my own where I hold sway—Harlem. Harlem, where I can thumb my nose at the world!*¹⁴

Hughes's reputation for accessibility, and for helping younger artists, made it easy for DeCarava to approach him. The two had a passing acquaintance, and in the summer of 1954 DeCarava called Hughes, who didn't hesitate to say, "Come on over!" Having tried and failed to find a publisher for his work, the photographer arrived with no expectations. But Hughes responded so enthusiastically to the pictures that, despite a heavy schedule of projects of his

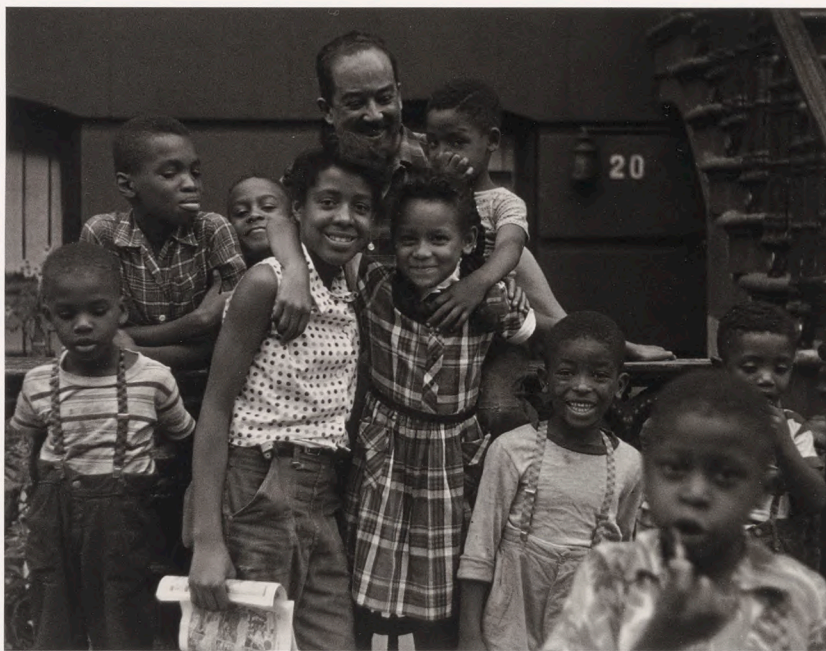
own, he insisted, "We have to get these published." Delighted, DeCarava left the project entirely in the hands of Hughes, who selected and sequenced the pictures and eventually elicited a contract from Simon and Schuster, with the provision that Hughes would write a text for the book.¹⁵

The Sweet Flypaper of Life appeared in November 1955 with 140 DeCarava photographs over ninety-eight pages. The text that links the pictures is the spirited monologue of Hughes's imaginary Sister Mary Bradley, a grandmother whose refusal to obey St. Peter's command to "come home" to heaven explains the book's title. "For one thing," she explains, "I want to stay here and see what this integration the Supreme Court has done decreed is going to be like."¹⁶ She is referring to *Brown v. Board of Education*, the 1954 ruling that dismantled the segregationist policy of "separate but equal." Thus within the first ten lines of his text Hughes introduced his feisty, sympathetic narrator and deftly signalled the historical and social implications of her highly personal musings. For just as Sister Mary's love for her children and grandchildren is only deepened by her shrewd awareness of their foibles and failings (she has taken in her favorite grandson, the charming but incorrigible Rodney, after his parents turned him out), her affection for Harlem is inseparable from her clear-eyed knowledge of the burdens that racial discrimination has brought to her people.

Mary Bradley's brief remarks are quick to make us see the social dimension of the photographs. Here is part of her commentary on two of DeCarava's subway pictures, including *Woman resting, subway entrance* (1952; page 96):

Now me, I always done a day's work ever since I come to New York, with no extra pay for riding the subway, which is the hardest work of all.

Sometimes when a woman comes home in the twilight evening, she's so tired she has to set down at the top of the steps to wait for the crosstown bus.¹⁷



10. Langston Hughes and friends. 1954

Hughes recognized the wonder of DeCarava's intimate family pictures, and he used more than three dozen of them. There are several of Joe James (called Jerry in the book) and his children:

Now you take that Jerry. There's no man living don't have some faults. Jerry's got his. But can't nobody say when he's home he ain't a family man. Crazy about his children—and his children are crazy about him. Come running to meet him at the door. And that baby ruther set on his lap than nurse its mama. Never saw a baby so crazy about its daddy.¹⁸

And, for *Joe holding baby* (1953; page 88):

He usually do mean to run out to the bar to grab himself a last-minute swig before it closes. But usually about that time one of the babies wakes up. Jerry goes and gets it.¹⁹

There is a social manifesto at work here: Hughes is attacking the blanket assumption that black men neglect their families. As in Hughes's *Simple* sketches, the argument is persuasive because it is cast in affecting human terms. Just as

Hughes reported that people often told him they knew someone exactly like Simple, DeCarava reports that the fictional personae Hughes invented for the people in the pictures—none of whom he knew—were all but perfectly true to life. Certainly this is evidence of how deeply Hughes understood his beloved Harlem, but it is also a tribute to the articulate humanity of DeCarava's pictures.

The initial publication of *Sweet Flypaper*—three thousand clothbound and twenty-two thousand paperbound copies—was soon supplemented by a second printing of ten thousand copies. The retail price of the paperbound edition was only one dollar, so the authors hardly became rich on their slim royalties, but the commercial and critical success of the book was gratifying to both of them. Hughes's biographer, Arnold Rampersad, has concluded that "no book by Hughes was ever greeted so rhapsodically."²⁰ Gilbert Millstein wrote in *The New York Times Book Review* that "the whole effect is one of fine unity. A book like 'The Sweet Flypaper of Life' should be bought by a great many people and read by a good many more. It is probably hortatory to say so, but the chances are it could accomplish a lot more about race relations than many pounds of committee reports."²¹

DeCarava's only regret was the size of the book: At five by seven inches, it could fit in one's coat pocket. He was right to be disappointed then, and the fame of *Sweet Flypaper* obliges us now to draw a distinction between the book and the body of photographs upon which it is based. For its seamless weave of image and text and its steady voice of perseverance and affection, the book is indeed a treasure, but it does not adequately represent DeCarava's achievement. The small format is one reason. Another is that Hughes naturally selected some pictures that serve a useful purpose within the scheme of the book but which dilute the power of DeCarava's best pictures. And, despite the aptness of the text, its presence masks the eloquence of photographs so complete in themselves that they require no

elucidation. For DeCarava had created a perfect whole whose force lies in the unity of its motives and meanings—personal, artistic, and social.

DeCarava never had lacked determination, and by the mid 1950s he had earned the twin confidence of a lasting artistic achievement and of public recognition for it. He had won a Guggenheim Fellowship, he had published a critically acclaimed and commercially successful book, and his photographs had appeared in exhibitions at The Museum of Modern Art, including four pictures in Steichen's popular extravaganza, *The Family of Man*, in 1955.²²

DeCarava put his confidence to work. In March 1955 he and his wife opened A Photographer's Gallery in Manhattan, a public forum for other photographers' work as well as DeCarava's own. In 1956 he embarked on an ambitious and ultimately extraordinary series of photographs on the theme of jazz, intending that the pictures would appear in his second book. Finally, in 1958 he quit his job as an illustrator to begin a career as a free-lance photographer.

The story of A Photographer's Gallery, all but forgotten, deserves to be remembered. Apart from Helen Gee's Limelight Photo Gallery in Greenwich Village, which opened less than a year before the DeCarava place, there had been no commercial gallery in New York devoted solely to photography for nearly half a century.²³ (The Witkin Gallery, today the oldest continuously operating photography gallery in New York, would not open until 1969.) The gallery's schedule of prices—\$12 for an 8-by-10-inch print, \$17 for 11-by-14, \$25 for 16-by-20, all including mounting—in itself suggests the pioneering spirit of the enterprise.²⁴ The clientele included friendly neighbors as well as photography enthusiasts, and DeCarava recalls with justifiable pride that the exhibition *Photographs Appropriate for Christmas Giving* brought in a total of \$1,800 in November and December 1955.

The 1950s were the heyday of the photographically illustrated magazines, whose powerful influence was less than wholly sympathetic to photographers who thought of themselves as artists. Here is the advice offered in 1953 by Sey Chassler, photography editor at *Collier's*:

*The solution to your creative problem is this: in the commercial field of magazine photography you must be creative for your client as well as for yourself. You must compromise. If you can't compromise, only two things can happen to you. You can either become a great and magnificent artist, hailed by all the intellectuals and museums but unpublished in general magazines. Or you can become a total failure, hailed by no one. But if you want to be successful, an honest and an unfrustrated soul in this business, you must compromise.*²⁵

DeCarava had no intention of compromising:

A Photographer's Gallery is interested in and concerned with photography that could be characterized as an artistic tool for the satisfaction and gratification of the psychic and creative needs of the photographer. We are interested in that area of photography which strives for the expression of self, which seeks to extend the vision that which has heretofore been invisible and elusive, to reaffirm self-evident truths too long forgotten, or too long taken for granted.

In another statement he wrote:

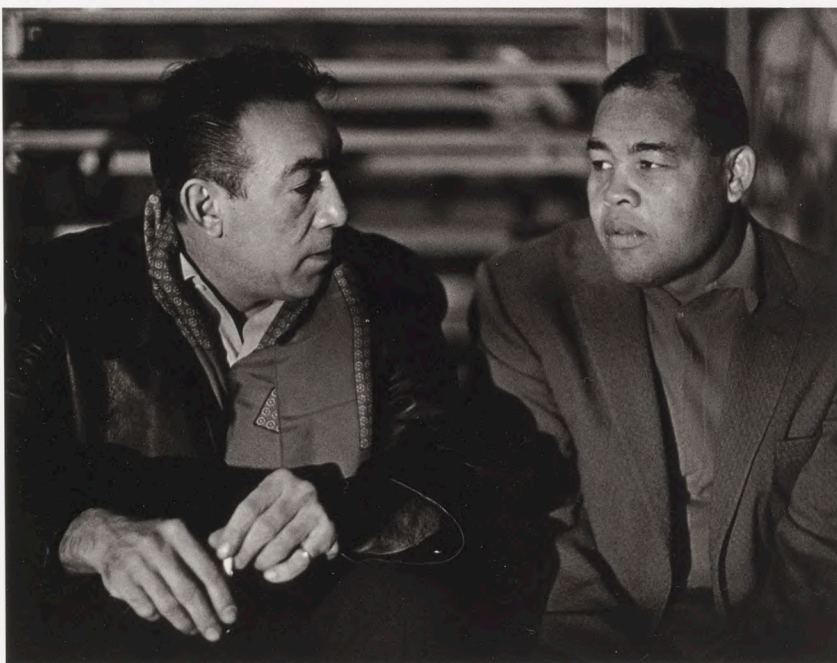
*A PHOTOGRAPHER'S GALLERY grew out of the need of a creative photographer to find a place for himself and for others like him. A place where a photographer's worth is independent of whether he has been published, who he knows or how hard he shoves. It is a gallery that values the single photograph on its merits alone, not how well it fits into a picture sequence, not because the subject is an important figure, or of news value, but because the subject is important to the photographer and will result in a photograph which will be of lasting beauty.*²⁶

The gallery, at 48 West Eighty-fourth Street, was open in the evenings Tuesday through Friday and in the afternoons on Saturday and Sunday. (For a schedule of the gallery's exhibitions, see pages 269–70.) From March 1955 until it closed in May 1957 the gallery presented seven one-person and five group exhibitions, including a survey of new talent intended to encourage younger photographers. The program was quite diverse. Following an inaugural exhibition of DeCarava's photographs, it included showings of work by Berenice Abbott, Harry Callahan, Van Deren Coke, Scott Hyde, Leon Levinstein, Jay Maisel, Ralph Eugene Meatyard, David Vestal, Dan Weiner, and Minor White. Jacob Deschin of *The New York Times* described the gallery's last exhibition, devoted to Callahan, as "probably the first comprehensive display of his over-all achievement in this city."²⁷ In a period when few art museums offered any photography program at all, the gallery struck a valiant blow. After two years, however, the burden of mounting exhibitions came to outweigh the reward, and the DeCaravas closed the gallery.

The following year DeCarava left his steady job and, for nearly two decades, until he joined the faculty at Hunter College in 1975, earned his living largely as a free lance. The idea was to spend less time making ends meet and more time making art, but it didn't always work out that way. His diverse list of clients is a record of his struggle to get work wherever he could find it.²⁸ Even as a contract photographer for *Sports Illustrated* from 1968 to 1975, he found the hustle of obtaining assignments to be a distracting, time-consuming, and frustrating business.

Certainly DeCarava was more than competent on the job. One particularly successful assignment was to make photographs on the set of *Requiem for a Heavyweight*, a 1962 film directed by Ralph Nelson, starring Anthony Quinn, Mickey Rooney, and Jackie Gleason (fig. 11). Quinn liked the photographs so much that he bought more than two hundred prints, which, as *Infinity* magazine reported, must have been some kind of record.²⁹ DeCarava also enjoyed

his work for *Scientific American*, which often allowed him the time and peace of mind to make photographs that fulfilled both his editors' needs and his own pride in his craft. Another satisfying job was his contribution to "New York 19," a television special produced by Harry Belafonte, which aired on CBS channel 2 on November 20, 1960. A celebration of life in the mid-Manhattan neighborhood circumscribed by New York postal code 19, the hour-



11. Anthony Quinn and Joe Louis. 1962

long program used sequences of DeCarava's photographs (some made for the purpose, some already existing) to link its disparate segments.

In exhibitions and books of his work DeCarava has presented only a tiny handful of pictures made on assignment. The chasm between what Sey Chassler called compromise and what DeCarava calls art makes it easy to see why. From the beginning DeCarava's work as an artist has issued from a well of personal reflection and conviction, where by definition nothing could be made to order. A photograph of Malcolm X, for example, taken at a Chicago rally while DeCarava was on assignment for *Good Housekeeping* (fig. 12), is better than most head shots that appear in the newspapers, but

the impersonal circumstance foreclosed any opportunity for the intimate warmth of feeling that inhabits the portraits DeCarava has made for himself (see pages 117–35).

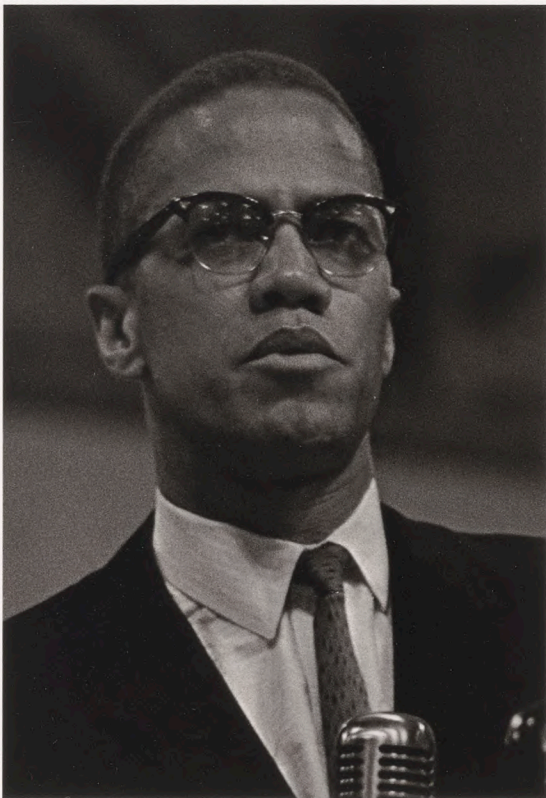
One aspect of his professional career that DeCarava does remember with pleasure is the work, some of it in color, that he did for the covers of record albums. He had been a jazz fan since he was a teenager, and occasional jobs for the music industry helped him to gain access to performances and recording sessions and to make new friends in the business. Characteristically, however, his best jazz pictures, the ones he made for himself, had nothing to do with commerce.

In the wake of the success of *Sweet Flypaper*, DeCarava had every reason to believe that he could again translate his art into book form—and do so this time in a way that better served the photographs themselves. By 1964 he had finished a carefully crafted dummy for a book he had conceived in 1956, to be titled "The Sound I Saw." Comprised of 205 photographs over 195 pages and incorporating a long poem by DeCarava, loosely related to the pictures, the dummy interpolates jazz photographs with scenes drawn from everyday life. The layout is simple and respects the integrity of the individual pictures, generally deploying them one to a page. The rhythmic sequence may be compared to the composition of *The Family of Man*—except that here all the pictures were made and arranged by a single artist. Publishers, however, were unprepared to risk such an ambitious photographic book, and DeCarava shelved the dummy he had worked so hard to create.³⁰ But we do have the jazz pictures he made for the book—the most beautiful and moving jazz photographs ever made.

Modern jazz was created in New York City in the 1940s—that is, just when and where DeCarava himself was forming his artistic persona. During the war, at the height of the Swing Era, when the big bands of Duke Ellington and Count Basie held sway, Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, Dizzy Gillespie, and a handful of others invented a new way of making music,

music whose cryptic name instantly established whether you got it or not: bebop. One might argue that a musical revolution of one sort or another was inevitable, given the presence of so many talented musicians in one city and the competitive edge of the jam sessions at which they gathered to listen to, learn from, and overwhelm each other. The impatience of the young and unrecognized with the old and established may also help to explain the insistent creative individuality of the new music, its distaste for confining ensemble arrangements. But that distaste also expressed a determination to achieve an absolute artistic independence, free of the entertainer's role that had tainted black music since white audiences had begun to applaud it.³¹ Bebop was born not in the clubs along Fifty-second Street but at Minton's, in Harlem, where the essential audience was composed of other musicians.

The point is illuminated by DeCarava's strug-



12. Malcolm X. 1964

gle to come to terms with one of his own pictures, *Dancers* (1956; page 211):

The photograph was taken at a dance of a social club at the 110th St. Manor at Fifth Avenue. It is about the intermission where they had entertainment and the entertainment was two dancers who danced to jazz music. That's what the image is all about; it's about these two dancers who represent a terrible torment for me in that I feel a great ambiguity about the image because of them. It's because they are in some ways distorted characters. What they actually are is two black male dancers who dance in the manner of an older generation of black vaudeville performers. The problem comes because their figures remind me so much of the real life experience of blacks in their need to put themselves in an awkward position before the man, for the man; to demean themselves in order to survive, to get along. In a way, these figures seem to epitomize that reality. And yet there is something in the figures not about that; something in the figures that is very creative, that is very real and very black in the finest sense of the word. So there is this duality, this ambiguity in the photograph that I find very hard to live with. I always have to make a decision in a case like this—is it good or is it bad? I have to say that even though it jars some of my sensibilities and it reminds me of things I would rather not be reminded of, it is still a good picture. In fact, it is good just because of those things and in spite of those things. The picture works.³²

Every photographer enjoys a unique perspective on his or her own photographs, a privileged knowledge of the circumstances in which they were made and of the intuitions that formed them. DeCarava's response to *Dancers* does not belong to this private realm, however. It arises instead from broad social and historical concerns that, in principle, are open to all. And yet, what white viewer has responded so deeply to *Dancers* before reading DeCarava's words? What white viewer has experienced a "terrible torment" while looking at this picture? The

present writer cannot claim to have done so. These questions suggest what it means to say that a black aesthetic is at work in DeCarava's photography. He rejects as simplistic the idea that the darkness of his prints is an expression of racial identity, but he endorses the notion of a black aesthetic based on shared cultural traditions and the common experience of American racism.³³ Artist Carrie Mae Weems has put it this way:

*A black idiom is simply one that comes out of the peculiar social, economic and cultural conditions that mold black people. If a photographer is sensitive and understands the idiosyncratic gestures and rituals of the culture and employs this understanding while shooting, then that person is working out of a black idiom or a black esthetic.*³⁴

Once asked whether he had a specific audience in mind, DeCarava answered, "Sometimes I do things I know black people will understand, but it's possible others will understand [them], too. I don't want to be exclusionary."³⁵

DeCarava's attentiveness to *Dancers* teaches us not only about his own work but about photography generally. A photograph proposes a relationship between a viewer (taking the place of the photographer) and a subject, an environment, an experience. To judge a photograph is to judge the quality of that relationship. Thus if we wish to make sense of photographs we must bring to them everything in ourselves that we bring to experience itself. In the process we may find the self or the photograph (or both) enriched or wanting (or both). In purely documentary terms, *Dancers* is a tour-de-force of observation, but DeCarava's remarks prove that there is no such thing as "purely documentary terms." In the end the photographer has concluded that the picture celebrates the dancers without demeaning them or, rather, that it succeeds by embodying the challenge of considering the conflict between these opposing readings. The photographer's own struggle to reach his understanding of the picture exempli-

fies the thoughtfulness that good photographs deserve—and from which they are made.

Like DeCarava's earlier series on Harlem life, his jazz work (an abbreviation of convenience, for the work also involves such related genres as the spiritual and rhythm and blues) covers the scene but goes deepest at one spot. There are wonderful pictures of jam sessions and ensembles, dancers and clubs, fans and listeners, which together evoke the communal environment of jazz. But many of the best pictures show individuals—isolated, self-possessed, and, when performing, utterly absorbed in the act of creation. This is the quality that elicits comparison with the aesthetic of bebop, which rested upon the conviction that to make music was not to entertain others but to plumb the self. DeCarava has said, "I don't think of musicians as musicians but as people—and as workers."³⁶

To his lasting regret, DeCarava never photographed the legendary saxophonist Charlie Parker, who died in 1955 at the age of thirty-four. His consciousness of this loss may help to explain the intensity with which he pursued his jazz passion; certainly it propelled his prolific study of Bird's great successor, John Coltrane (figs. 13–16). In the early 1960s, whenever he possibly could, DeCarava attended Coltrane's performances throughout the Northeast, and his pictures collectively manifest the quality that to DeCarava makes Coltrane's music so compelling:

He wasn't trying to be noble, but he was noble because he never gave up. He was always searching. The bar would close, the audience would go home, and Trane would keep playing, trying to find what more there was inside.

In jazz there is never a wrong note because each note can be redeemed by the next one. In traditional painting, for example, you begin by laying out the perspective, then sketch in the outlines of figures, add color, light and shadow, step by step. In improvisation you do it all at once: melody, rhythm, tone—feeling—all at once.

Thus in true improvisation there is no room for dissembling, for emotional dishonesty, because

it is instantly, transparently revealed. DeCarava's pictures (and not only his jazz pictures) show that the same is true of photography.

After nearly a decade of avidly photographing the jazz milieu, and after completing his rich tribute to Coltrane, DeCarava slowed down. He remembers that he began to feel a conflict between listening (feeling) and photographing (seeing), as if the pursuit of one interfered with the other. What is so precious about his best pictures is that they dissolve the conflict, making whole in still, silent pictures the depth of music's emotion.

Even as he pursued more-or-less clearly defined projects, such as his pictures of Harlem life or the jazz photographs, DeCarava regarded them as part of the evolving whole of his art. He has approached photography always as an unbroken continuity of artistic expression, unified not by a particular subject or theme but by the force of a unique sensibility.

The point may seem obvious now, but, if so, DeCarava's singular dedication to his art is part of the reason why. The rise of the documentary aesthetic in the 1930s had vastly expanded the range of subject matter for artistic photography, but the expediencies and messy accommodations of photography's varied documentary applications, especially in the magazines, had muddied the identity of photography as an art. In the 1950s, as DeCarava and others staked out artistic positions within the broadened field, they relied upon an intuitive confidence that an accumulation of individual pictures, each responsive to immediate experience, would add up to more than the sum of its parts—to what came to be called "a body of work," whose coherence arose not from adherence to the predetermined outline of an assigned subject but from a persuasively personal approach to a subject that could not be defined as such apart from the work.

DeCarava has interpreted this mandate narrowly. With marginal exceptions his photographic hunting ground has been coextensive

with his personal stomping ground; even the jazz pictures began as the applause of a fan who had come first to listen, not to make pictures. Within this limited arena DeCarava has photographed only what moved him, only what seemed important to *him*, ignoring what might be expected to be important to others. Of course he hoped that what mattered to him would come to matter to others if he succeeded artistically, an outlook that allowed him to forego breadth of subject in pursuit of depth of feeling. This is why DeCarava resists the "documentary" label: not only because it tends to reduce photography to the mechanical gathering of facts but because it implies a pose of sociological neutrality that is inimical to his art.

In stylistic terms, DeCarava's insistence upon the artistic motive expresses itself in two principle modes. The first relies upon simple, tangible forms confidently deployed within the measured harmony of the frame, as in the work of Cartier-Bresson. DeCarava mastered this mode very quickly, bringing to it a talent that merged a terse pictorial economy with a tangible sensuousness that borders on the voluptuous. The second mode relies instead upon the dissolution of material form in a unified field of light and shadow. This approach also devolved from the hand-camera aesthetic, which had fostered the principle that artificial light supplied by the photographer would violate the authenticity of experience. Thus the photographer was obliged to use whatever light was available, even when there wasn't much of it. In the post-war work of such young photographers as Louis Faurer, Robert Frank, and W. Eugene Smith, the available-light revolution spawned a style that favored atmosphere over detail, a style rich in reverie and romantic emotion. Here, too, DeCarava made the style his own by distilling it and adapting it to his own concerns.

In both respects, *Hallway* (1953; page 105) is an exemplary picture. Like his commentary on *Dancers* (quoted above and also drawn from Sherry Turner DeCarava's essay of 1981), his explication of *Hallway* is indispensable to any consideration of his work:

13. Coltrane looking. 1961

14. Coltrane #27. 1961



If I ever wanted to be marooned with one photograph, I think I would want to be marooned with Hallway simply because it was one of my first photographs to break through a kind of literalness. It didn't break through, actually, because the literalness is still there, but I found something else that is very strong and I linked it up with a certain psychological aspect of my own. It's something that I had experienced and is, in a way, personal, autobiographical. It's about a hallway that I know I must have experienced as a child. Not just one hallway; it was all the hallways that I grew up in. They were poor, poor tenements, badly lit, narrow and confining; hallways that had something to do with the economics of building for poor people. When I saw this particular hallway I went home on the subway and got my camera and tripod, which I rarely use. The ambience, the light in this hallway was so personal, so individual that any other kind of light would not have worked. It just brought back all those things that I had experienced as a child in those hallways. It was

frightening, it was scary, it was spooky, as we would say when we were kids. And it was depressing. And yet, here I am an adult, years and ages and ages later, looking at the same hallway and finding it beautiful.

. . . You can profit from a negative and make it positive. As beautiful as the photograph is, the subject is not beautiful in the sense of living in it. But beauty is in being alive—strange that I should use that word living! But it is alive.³⁷

The conception of photography as an expressive and interpretive art, grounded in concrete experience but rich in metaphor; the seamless identity of the personal and the social; the bite of understatement in the phrase “something to do with the economics of building for poor people”; the openness to powerful emotion; the ultimate optimism—much that is essential to DeCarava's aesthetic is expressed in these words. And the picture bears out the remarks of its maker. As Sherry Turner DeCarava observes, the lone fixture is “a light that gives off no



15. Coltrane playing,
left. 1961

16. Coltrane #24. 1961

light."³⁸ But another fixture, just beyond the frame, casts from above a warm glow on the ceiling and walls, as the picture's orthogonal lines descend gently toward us. We do indeed feel the claustrophobic constriction of the passage. We approach a portal of inhuman narrowness. But the picture itself welcomes us with its breadth; the focus recedes as the confining walls advance, dissolving them in a blanket of soft tones.

DeCarava is famous for his luxurious shadows, for the delicate interplay of tones in pictures that reside at the dark end of the photographic scale. He insists that these pictures are not about darkness but about light, pointing out that without light we could see nothing at all—and in DeCarava's photographs seeing is feeling. The dark pictures make good on this equation, drawing us into the night of experience, into the time of loneliness and foreboding, of romance and dreams. In them the sensuousness of form that is so characteristic of DeCarava's other pictures is transposed to the image as a whole, whose lux-

ury of subtle tones seduces us into reflection.

All of DeCarava's photography invites reflection, because its lyric compression suggests metaphoric interpretation. In one sense this remark is not much help, for all of photography is metaphor, above all synecdoche. The part stands for the whole: the bars for the prison, the street for the city, the couple for love. What varies is the reach of the metaphor. The more elemental the image, the more likely it is to invite symbolic interpretation, and therein lies the risk of banality: If we are expected to see the world in a grain of sand, the grain of sand had better hold our attention. The power of DeCarava's art lies in his ability to invent images whose breadth of metaphor is enforced by the physical immediacy of experience.

Consider one of his most frankly symbolic pictures, *Sun and shade* (1952; page 170), in which two boys playing with toy guns confront each other across an unbending line that separates light from dark. As an emblem of opposition—in DeCarava's words, between "light and

shade, black and white, life and death"³⁹—the image hardly could be more stark. Yet it is free of the rhetorical bombast that often arises when the raw material of reality is summarily trimmed to illustrate an idea. Here, instead of trimming reality, the picture celebrates it, capturing both the boys' exuberance and the encouraging brilliance of the sunlight. It is precisely because the photographer declines to impose his metaphor upon reality that his daring leap from the tangible to the abstract succeeds.

DeCarava recalls that he sensed the picture first and decoded it later. Just the opposite obtained in the making of *Man coming up subway stairs* (1952; page 95). The story behind the picture involves an anxious dilemma familiar to hand-camera photographers. DeCarava had found a propitious spot for the picture he had in mind and had exposed a number of frames. When at last he saw the man at the bottom of the stairs, the man who was perfect for his picture, he realized that only one unexposed frame remained on the roll of film in his camera. Should he save that frame and try for the one perfect shot, or should he reload and risk missing the picture altogether? The story is apposite because it suggests how fully DeCarava had planned the picture in advance. So, too, does his Guggenheim proposal, written at least several months before the making of the picture:

I want to express that moment when a man going to work has meaning for that man and for me, not the fragment of the whole but the expression that sets it apart for all men going to work at that given moment, when that man ceases being one man but becomes all men.

In the picture, of course, the man is not going to but coming from work, exhausted by the day's labor—a day like thousands before it and thousands still to come. The danger in conceiving such a generic type is that the conception will obliterate the individual, thus draining the picture of the force of reality. DeCarava met the challenge with the concreteness of his description, so that, while the man is anonymous (as he

must be to stand for so many others), his physical and psychological presence is powerful: the set of his jaw, the clench of his left hand in his belt, the reach of his other arm, the prow of his fedora, beaten and soiled but also elegant, like the turn of his collar. This aspect of DeCarava's style recalls Dorothea Lange's talent for combining graphic simplicity with physical specificity and, in so doing, vaulting the individual into the realm of symbol without leaving the individual behind. For DeCarava, as for Lange, muscle and bone, and sunlight upon the folds of clothing are enough to tell the story of a life.

Throughout his career DeCarava's artistic instinct has been to strip away the circumstantial in order to reach the universal, to distill a whole world of experience into an elemental image. It is a heady ambition whose success rests in equal measure upon sensuousness of photographic description and warmth of human feeling. In the portraits, for example, the particulars of setting and occasion fall away before the eidetic presence of the person, whom DeCarava offers to us as a unique being. Thus, even as the portraits meet the definition of the genre by giving us an individual, they weave a poetry of individuality in which each of us alone is an encouragement and comfort to all others.

Among DeCarava's pictures of people, photographs such as *Bill and son* (1966; page 180) and *Two men, torsos* (1979; page 226) represent the extreme of the reductive impulse in his art. In these pictures the people are faceless, anonymous; we see only fragments of their bodies. And yet the pictures evoke the most fundamental human bonds—of father to son, of friend to friend. In *Bill and son*, although we do not see the face of parent or child, we are conscious that each sees the other, exchanging through their eyes as well as through their bodies the depth of filial love: Seeing is feeling.

Father, son, friend. In DeCarava's photographs each person achieves an elemental identity: child, lover, parent, worker, man, woman, *individual*—meaning the irreducible singularity that makes collective humanity human. Thus the social meanings of DeCarava's art are embedded

in a heartfelt manifesto of the reciprocal ideal of modern democratic society. Only a society that holds dear the uniqueness of the individual can be just; and only individuals who hold dear such a collective ideal can together achieve it.

Roy DeCarava was present at the historic March on Washington of August 28, 1963. Among the photographs he made that day is *Mississippi freedom marcher, Washington, D.C.* (page 197). We see the face of a young woman, beautiful, confident, calm, who seems at once to look outward, beyond us, and within. Shadowy fragments of other figures suggest, barely, that she is in the midst of a crowd, but her bearing and expression, as much as the closely cropped frame, isolate her.

Without the title we might never guess the occasion of the picture. DeCarava states firmly that its subject is the beauty of human promise, not the struggle for racial equality, and it is impossible to look at the picture and disagree with him. And yet the title of the picture—and its date—do matter. Here are DeCarava's comments on a similar picture, *Five men*, which he made the following year (page 179):

The motivation at that moment was my political understanding of the treatment of black people and their response to injustice. This moment occurred during a memorial service for the children killed in a church in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1964. The photograph shows men coming out of the service at a church in Harlem. I was aware of all this, and I wanted to make a picture, to commemorate that day. I wasn't there at the bombing, I wasn't in the church, but I knew what it was and I wanted to make a picture that dealt with it. The [five] men were coming out of the church with faces so serious and so intense, and the image was made.⁴⁰

In July 1963 DeCarava spent a single day photographing a demonstration organized by African-American residents of a Brooklyn neighborhood to protest the razing of their

homes to clear ground for an addition to Downstate Medical Center. "These were people who probably had never protested in their lives, but they had struggled for years to buy their own homes," he explains. "They had nothing against hospitals but they objected to being displaced forcibly. Some of them stood in front of the bulldozers and wouldn't move." Those who wouldn't move were carried away bodily by the authorities, an act described in *Force, Downstate* (page 198). Or rather, the picture does not so much describe the act as transpose its awkward brutality to an image of classical stillness.

DeCarava remembers that he made the trip to Washington in August 1963 with some trepidation because, while he felt strongly about the march, he was uncomfortable with his sense of obligation to record the public face of the event, filled with crowds and placards. "I shot a lot of film, but the pictures were too pat, too obvious," he recalls. "When I recognized that my heart wasn't in it, I felt relieved of doing what I was supposed to do." The photographs he made while he was doing what he was supposed to do are perfectly adequate as reportage, but they fail to move us (for example, fig. 17). However, *Mississippi freedom marcher*, which adheres so absolutely to DeCarava's artistic instincts that it might have been made almost anywhere at almost any time, embodies the spirit of the march. The paradox obliges us to pause before reading DeCarava's work of the early 1960s as either a passive mirror or an impassioned manifesto of the civil rights movement. But neither should we read the polarity between the resolutely private conviction of DeCarava's artistic will and the ready slogans of political rhetoric as an expression of withdrawal into an aesthetic ivory tower.

From his early maturity DeCarava repeatedly took up the challenge of collective action. In the late 1940s, for example, he played a vital role in establishing a union at the advertising agency where he worked. At first he had done little more than agree to join the union, but,



17. March on Washington.
1963

when the original union organizer left the firm, DeCarava's sense of commitment to his fellow workers led him to assume leadership of the ultimately successful effort. Not long after, he became active in the Committee for the Negro in the Arts, an organization founded in 1947 by cultural leaders, black and white, to win recognition for African-American artists, to combat racial stereotypes, and to promote the cultural life of Harlem.⁴¹ (His 1954 portrait of Paul Robeson [page 119] was made at a CNA meeting.) Around 1950, when Charles White left New York, DeCarava took his place as head of the Committee's Art Chapter.

DeCarava later extended his commitment to community activism in the arts when he became the founding chairman of the Kamoinge Workshop, an organization that took shape in 1963 when two budding associations of African-American photographers merged.⁴² DeCarava had been earning his living as a free-lance photographer since 1958 and he was a member of the leading professional organization, the American Society of Magazine Photographers. At ASMP he joined and soon led the Committee to End Discrimination against Black Photogra-

phers, which Edward Steichen served as honorary chairman. The effort collapsed when, at a key meeting, a leading black photographer dismissed DeCarava's claims of racial prejudice in the magazine industry. Frustrated and fed up, DeCarava and several other black photographers left ASMP.⁴³ Resolving to devote their energies to the African-American community, they joined discussions that led to the creation of the Kamoinge Workshop.

"Kamoinge" means "group effort" in Kikuyu, the Bantu language of central and southern Kenya. The group's members met regularly to exchange ideas and discuss each other's work. They opened a gallery on 125th Street and soon began to produce and sell group portfolios of their photographs.⁴⁴ Among the central figures were Shawn Walker, Louis Draper, Ray Francis, James Mannas, and (after 1965) Beuford Smith. Like the WPA-sponsored art programs of DeCarava's youth, the workshop was centered on community life: The Harlem neighborhood was both its essential subject and its intended principal audience. Broadly speaking, Kamoinge was one of many cultural organizations through which the civil rights movement reinvigorated the spirit of community solidarity that had flourished in Harlem two or three decades earlier. Comparable in its mission was SPIRAL, a group of African-American painters and sculptors also formed in 1963.⁴⁵ Among its founders was Norman Lewis (see fig. 18; page 131), with whom DeCarava soon developed a close friendship that flourished until the painter's death in 1979.

The same solidarity with the Harlem community that led DeCarava to give his energies to Kamoinge caused him to join protests against the exhibition *Harlem on My Mind*, which opened at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in January 1969.⁴⁶ Largely an environmental collage of photographic enlargements, the exhibition purported to trace the history of black life in Harlem since the turn of the century. Harlem leaders and black artists objected that it simultaneously imposed the views of white outsiders and silenced the voices of blacks—voices such

as DeCarava's own in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*.⁴⁷ In part because the exhibition relied so much on photography, DeCarava found himself playing a prominent role in the protests and in discussions with Thomas Hoving, the museum's director. In a brief review, written at the invitation of David Vestal for *Popular Photography*, DeCarava wryly confined himself to denouncing the installation as an amateurish cacaphony, saving his withering judgment of the content for a brief last sentence:

It is evident from the physical makeup of the show that Schoener and company have no respect for or understanding of photography, or, for that matter, any of the other media that they employed.

*I would say also that they have no great love or understanding for Harlem, black people, or history.*⁴⁸

This synopsis of DeCarava's record of social commitment is hardly a substitute for an assessment of the social dimension of his art. But the reverse is also true. One measure of the power of DeCarava's art is the futility of extracting from it general social or political messages that do not carry with them the particularity of personal conviction.

In 1958, when DeCarava quit his salaried job, he moved to a fourth-floor loft on Sixth Avenue near Thirty-eighth Street, in the garment district. The loft proved to be an ideal perch from which to observe the life of the street, in part because from the elevated viewpoint figures often appeared against the blank ground of the pavement—perfect for DeCarava's simplifying style. From the loft (and at street level) he made an extensive series of photographs of the laborers who do the heavy, essential work of transporting materials and goods within the garment district. These photographs celebrate the strength and grace of the workers. At the same time, in DeCarava's graphically compressed style, the men are imprisoned in their work. Almost all of them are black. In fact, these jobs were well known in Harlem as the

likely fate of young, uneducated blacks; in *Manchild in the Promised Land* (1965), Claude Brown wrote:

*I'd been doing a lot of changing in less than a year. I'd gotten out of the garment center, and that was the place where everybody worked. Cats used to call it a "slave." A guy who worked in the garment center wouldn't say he had a job; he'd say, "Man, like, I got a slave." That was what it amounted to. It was a real drag. I had seen old men down there, old colored cats, pushing those trucks and sweating. They looked like they were about sixty years old, but they were still pushing trucks through the snow.*⁴⁹

The pictures of workers contribute to a strain of tough-mindedness that grows stronger in DeCarava's work around 1960. Within the lyricism and warmth of the earlier work, only a handful of pictures, such as *Two women, mannequin's hand* (1950; page 144), *Couple, Fifth Avenue* (1951; page 145), and *David* (1952; page 174), allude to the menace of racism or the pain it causes. Even pictures such as *Man coming up subway stairs* (page 95) stress human perseverance, not burdens to be overcome. By the early 1960s there were also pictures that showed blacks who are not just exhausted but trapped or defeated—and whites who are cold, arrogant, or mean.⁵⁰ In one picture the two are combined, as a white woman wrapped in icy indifference passes by a black woman buried in anguish (page 147).

Such angry pictures by the most tender-hearted of photographers disappear after the mid 1960s. It is easy to make too much of them, or too little, because it is too easy to read their force of private emotion as the rhetorical virulence of political argument. But these are not political pictures any more than DeCarava's photographs of protesters and mourners are ready-made emblems of the civil rights movement. They are, rather, expressions of the depth of his personal engagement with life, which includes but extends beyond social and political struggle. As such, instead of persuading us to adopt

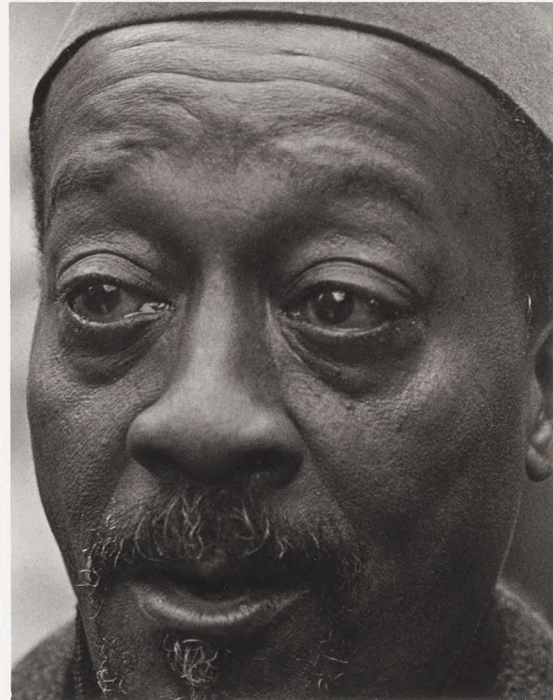
the impersonal righteousness of politics, they invite each of us to engage in a private struggle of his or her own.

Today, decades later, DeCarava is reluctant to dwell upon—even, in some cases, to show—his toughest photographs of the early 1960s. He is distrustful of the abstractions of politics, arguing that the challenge of achieving human justice lies within the hearts of women and men. It seems to me, however, that DeCarava's photographs always have framed the challenge in this way, much as James Baldwin did in the conclusion of "Notes of a Native Son," published in the same year as *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*:

It began to seem that one would have to hold in the mind forever two ideas which seemed to be in opposition. The first idea was acceptance, totally without rancour, of life as it is, and men as they are: in the light of this idea, it goes without saying that injustice is a commonplace. But this did not mean that one could be complacent, for the second idea was of equal power: that one must never, in one's own life, accept these injustices as commonplace but must fight them with all one's strength. This fight begins, however, in the heart and now it had been laid to my charge to keep my own heart free of hatred and despair.⁵¹

The essay looks back upon the summer of 1943, when Baldwin's father died on the same day that riots erupted in Harlem, and when the author himself, then nineteen years old, discovered his lasting rage at American racism. "There is not a Negro alive who does not have this rage in his blood—one has the choice, merely, of living with it consciously or surrendering to it."⁵² By the end of the essay Baldwin has made the choice—the same choice made manifest in DeCarava's photography.

In 1971 Roy DeCarava married Sherry Turner. Their three daughters, Susan, Wendy, and Laura, were born over the next several years.



18. Norman Lewis. 1969

Home and family—his own—became again a vital subject for the photographer who had first made his mark by capturing the warmth and intimacy of domestic life (see pages 248–54).

In 1975 DeCarava accepted a full-time position teaching photography at Hunter College, where he earned tenure in 1979 and in 1988 was named Distinguished Professor of Art of the City University of New York. The same year that he began teaching at Hunter he was invited by the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., to participate in a program of commissions, each followed by a one-person exhibition, under the general title "The Nation's Capital in Photographs."⁵³ The result was the only extended body of work DeCarava has ever made outside of New York City (see pages 150, 154, 188, 189). Three years later, in 1978, he was one of twenty American photographers commissioned by American Telephone and Telegraph to make new work for an exhibition and book titled *American Images*.⁵⁴ Upon securing his contract at Hunter, DeCarava had abruptly ended the onerous struggle of his free-lance

career. Together with his first regular paycheck since 1958, these commissions encouraged him to pursue his work with the independence he continues to cherish.

In a statement for *American Images*, DeCarava wrote:

*I try to photograph things that are near to me because I work best among things I know. I'm not concerned with startling anyone or discovering new forms; formal qualities are only tools to help state my message.*⁵⁵

Like his older contemporary, Harry Callahan, DeCarava discovered his essential themes and pictorial vocabulary within a few years of becoming a photographer and has proceeded to enrich them without interruption for decades. The progress of his art is more cyclical than linear; each successive experiment is like a new story told by an old friend.

In conversation DeCarava is a ready philosopher, quick to grasp the general in the particular, fascinated by the interrelationship of the infinitesimally small and the infinitely large. What makes his observations moving is the personal fervor with which he engages the most abstract ideas, bringing immediate human meaning to them. Recently this most urban of photographers has indulged his taste for metaphor in unabashedly symbolic images of nature—blades of tall grass buffeted in the wind (page 237), a glimmering tapestry of foliage spanned by a noble branch, bent by the weight of its fruitful burden (page 239). At the same time these pictures are of a piece with DeCarava's lifelong love of the rhythms of life in the city, its ceaseless ebb and flow.

If DeCarava's recent nature pictures embody his impulse to get to the heart of the matter by focusing on the essential detail, other photographs of the past decade have reached in the opposite direction, toward a broader view. Where before he would have isolated the telling gesture, so as to heighten its metaphorical power, in *Black blouse* (1985; page 260) he sets the delicate inwardness of his protagonist

within the bustle of the street, often present in earlier pictures only by implication. Even the piercing centered singularity of *Man sleeping in corrugated carton* (1987; page 175) is achieved from a step or two further back than before, in an image that marries tenderness and respect, and which seems to make a whole park from a small patch of grass.

As in *Black blouse*, the cast of characters in *Fourth of July* (1985; page 257) has multiplied to make a community, in which the distinction between family and neighborhood does not apply. The spirit of communal warmth is incarnated in the central glow that emanates from the shared table. Technically speaking, DeCarava was obliged to hold his shutter open long enough for the dim light to illuminate the outer figures and thus to accept blurred movement and the brilliance of light at the center. Artistically speaking, he welcomed this variation on the old available-light aesthetic, in which blur signified immediacy. In other pictures DeCarava extended the convention still further beyond its original function, so that blur is not merely an indicator of motion but a consciously deployed stylistic device (see pages 262 and 267).

A retrospective looks upon the past—what else can it do? DeCarava, as he always has, looks toward the future. He is not likely, however, to revise the fundamental outlook that has served him well for decades:

*My photographs are subjective and personal—they're intended to be accessible, to relate to people's lives. . . . People—their well-being and survival—are the crux of what's important to me.*⁵⁶

Many artists might have written the second of these two sentences, although perhaps not so many would have used the word "survival"—a sign of DeCarava's awareness that some people in fact do not survive. The first sentence is the unusual one. Such a declaration is self-con-

tradictory according to the lexicon of modern culture, in which the personal and subjective are defined in opposition to the social and accessible. For DeCarava, however, it was natural to link these opposing terms, as if one entailed the other.

From the beginning his art has been medita-

tive and private. Staying close to home, he has all but ignored the vast world beyond, finding joy and trouble enough in his own world. Yet it is his inwardness that justifies the universal claims of his art. In the resolute pursuit of his own individuality he has honored the individuality of others.

NOTES

- 1 This and subsequent unattributed quotations from Roy DeCarava derive from extensive conversations with the author in the first half of 1995. These conversations are also the source of the unattributed facts presented here. By far the most thoughtful interpretive essay on DeCarava's work is Sherry Turner DeCarava, "Celebration," in James Alinder, ed., *Roy DeCarava: Photographs* (Carmel, Calif.: The Friends of Photography, 1981), pp. 7-20 (hereafter *Roy DeCarava: Photographs* [1981]). The first attempt to survey DeCarava's career was A. D. Coleman's article "Roy DeCarava: Thru Black Eyes," *Popular Photography*, vol. 66, no. 4 (April 1970), pp. 68-71, 113-15, 118-19, 168, which soon was followed by a chapter devoted to DeCarava in Elton C. Fax, *Seventeen Black Artists* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1971), pp. 167-87. See also Ruth Wallen, "Reading the Shadows—The Photography of Roy DeCarava," *Exposure* (Society for Photographic Education), vol. 27, no. 4 (Fall 1990), pp. 13-26.
- 2 See Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists from 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), pp. 115-35, 168-80. See also *Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America* (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem and Harry N. Abrams, 1987), with an introduction by Mary Schmidt Campbell and essays by David Driskell, David Levering Lewis, and Deborah Willis Ryan.
- 3 Claude McKay, *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* (1940); quoted in Mary Schmidt Campbell, "Romare Bearden: A Creative Mythology," Ph.D. dissertation, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York, 1982, p. 51.
- 4 See Deirdre L. Bibby, *Augusta Savage and the Art Schools of Harlem*, exhibition catalogue (New York: The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture of The New York Public Library, 1988), pp. 7-11; Gwendolyn Bennett, "The Harlem Community Art Center," in Francis V. O'Connor, ed., *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1973), pp. 213-15; and short unpublished essays by Alyse Abrams, S. Michelson, Vivian Morris, and Simon Williamson on aspects of the Federal Art Project in Harlem, housed among the WPA Writers Project Papers at The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture of The New York Public Library.
- 5 See Bearden and Henderson, *African-American Artists*, pp. 234-35.
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp. 405-17; see also Peter Clothier, "Charles White: A Critical Perspective," in *Images of Dignity: A Retrospective of the Works of Charles White*, exhibition catalogue (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1982), pp. 10-38.
- 7 Quoted in Bearden and Henderson, *African-American Artists*, p. 245.
- 8 *Idem.*
- 9 References to DeCarava serigraphs in group exhibitions at the Serigraph Galleries appear in *The Art Digest*, vol. 21, no. 19 (August 1, 1947), p. 16; and vol. 24, no. 6 (December 15, 1949), p. 23.
- 10 The three DeCarava photographs purchased by Steichen in 1950 are *Girl in print dress* (1949-50), reproduced here on page 19; *Woman in striped dress* (1949-50); and *Two boys in vacant lot* (1949), reproduced in *Roy DeCarava: Photographs* (1981), pl. 2.
- 11 In addition to Steichen, DeCarava listed as references on his Guggenheim application Homer Page, Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden, artist Gregorio Prestipino, and Dorothy S. Homer, librarian of the Countee Cullen Branch of The New York Public Library.
- 12 An excellent point of comparison is Aaron Siskind's "Harlem Document," much of it made as a Photo League project; see Siskind, *Harlem Document: Photographs 1932-1940* (Providence, R.I.: Matrix Publications, 1981).
- 13 Quoted in Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, vol. 2, 1941-1967: *I Dream a World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 146.
- 14 From "A Toast to Harlem," in Langston Hughes, *The Best of Simple* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961), p. 22.

- Hughes's Simple sketches began to appear in the *Chicago Defender* in early 1943.
- 15 See Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, vol. 2, pp. 242-43, 249. For the publication history of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, see the bibliography on page 274 of this volume.
 - 16 Roy DeCarava and Langston Hughes, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), p. 3.
 - 17 *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.
 - 18 *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49.
 - 19 *Ibid.*, p. 46.
 - 20 Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, vol. 2, p. 249.
 - 21 Gilbert Millstein, "While Sister Mary Sticks Around," *The New York Times Book Review*, November 27, 1955, Sect. 7, p. 5.
 - 22 DeCarava's photographs were first exhibited at The Museum of Modern Art in Steichen's *Always the Young Strangers* (1953), an exhibition of work by twenty-five young American photographers. Subsequent exhibitions organized by Steichen that included work by DeCarava were *The Family of Man* (1955), *Seventy Photographers Look at New York* (1957), *Photographs from the Museum Collection* (1958), and *Recent Acquisitions: Photography* (1960).
 - 23 The reference is to Stieglitz's Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession, which opened at 291 Fifth Avenue in 1905 and began to exhibit paintings and drawings in 1908. Helen Gee's *Limelight: A Memoir* will be published in 1996 by the University of New Mexico Press.
 - 24 Jacob Deschin, "Gallery in Debut: DeCarava Show Opens New Display Quarters," *The New York Times*, March 13, 1955, Sect. 2, p. 14x.
 - 25 Sey Chassler, "The Creative Photographer in the Cruel World," *Infinity* (American Society of Magazine Photographers), vol. 13 (January 1954), p. 5.
 - 26 Both statements, the first titled "Photography, Photographers, and a Gallery," the second untitled, are preserved in the DeCarava clippings file at The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture of The New York Public Library.
 - 27 Jacob Deschin, "Two New Shows," *The New York Times*, April 14, 1957, Sect. 2, p. x17.
 - 28 DeCarava's clients included *Fortune*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Harper's*, *Life*, *McCall's*, *Newsweek*, *Scientific American*, and *Time* magazines; Columbia Records, Prestige Records, RCA Records, and Vanguard Records; BBD&O Advertising, Belafonte Enterprises, CBS Television, Con Edison, David Suskind Productions, Grey Advertising, IBM, Merrick Associates, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the National Urban League, the Planned Parenthood Federation, Roosevelt Hospital, and Young and Rubicam.
 - 29 "Grapevine," *Infinity* (American Society of Magazine Photographers), vol. 11, no. 10 (December 1962), p. 29.
 - 30 He did salvage his brilliant title, however, for an exhibition at The Studio Museum in Harlem in 1983; see C. Daniel Dawson, *The Sound I Saw: The Jazz Photographs of Roy DeCarava*, exhibition catalogue (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1983).
 - 31 Particularly thoughtful on this point are two essays by Ralph Ellison, "The Golden Age, Time Past" (1959) and "On Bird, Bird-Watching, and Jazz" (1962); reprinted in Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964), pp. 199-212 and 221-32, respectively.
 - 32 Quoted in Sherry Turner DeCarava, "Celebration," in *Roy DeCarava: Photographs* (1981), p. 13.
 - 33 For DeCarava's discussion of the black aesthetic in his work, see Ivor Miller, "'If It Hasn't Been One of Color': An Interview with Roy DeCarava," *Callaloo: A Journal of Afro-American and African Arts and Letters* (The Johns Hopkins University Press), vol. 13, no. 4 (Fall 1990), pp. 846-58; W. R. Middlebrook, "The Work of Roy DeCarava: His Personal Perspective," *Obscura* (Los Angeles Center for Photographic Studies), vol. 2, no. 4 (Winter 1982), pp. 2-7; and Steven Jenkins, "Arttalk: Roy DeCarava, Photographer," *Artweek* (Oakland, Calif.), vol. 22, no. 11 (March 21, 1991), pp. 3, 18.
 - 34 Quoted in Sidney Doniger, Sandra Matthews, and Gillian Brown, "Personal Perspectives on the Evolution of American Black Photography: A Talk with Carrie Weems," *Obscura* (Los Angeles Center for Photographic Studies), vol. 2, no. 4 (Winter 1982), p. 17.
 - 35 Quoted in Jenkins, "Arttalk: Roy DeCarava, Photographer," p. 3.
 - 36 Quoted in A. D. Coleman, "This Person Passing Through: The Images of Roy DeCarava," *Camera & Darkroom* (Beverly Hills, Calif.), vol. 14, no. 12 (December 1992), p. 36.
 - 37 Quoted in Sherry Turner DeCarava, "Celebration," in *Roy DeCarava: Photographs* (1981), pp. 14-15.
 - 38 *Ibid.*, p. 15.
 - 39 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 10.
 - 40 Quoted in Charles H. Rowell, "'I Have Never Looked Back Since': An Interview with Roy DeCarava," *Callaloo: A Journal of Afro-American and African Arts and Letters* (The Johns Hopkins University Press), vol. 13, no. 4 (Fall 1990), p. 864.
 - 41 DeCarava recalls that in the early 1950s the Committee for the Negro in the Arts was branded as an un-American organization by Joseph McCarthy and was soon

- disbanded. References to the Committee are scarce beyond material in the clippings file at The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, which contains an unsigned, four-page "Organizational Report" that states: "The primary aim of our organization was, and remains, the integration of Negro artists into all forms of American culture on a dignified basis of merit and equality. Additional aims were to wipe out the persisting racial stereotype and to create employment for Negroes in the various art fields. . . ."
- "It was recognized that the Negro artist is consistently discriminated against in his attempt at practicing his craft and earning a living. Outstanding Negro talents have been recognized only after a struggle to eliminate existing barriers."
- 42 One of the two groups consisted of photographers, including DeCarava, who resigned membership from the American Society of Magazine Photographers when they concluded that the association was unresponsive to their concerns; the other was a Harlem group that called itself Camera 35. See Doniger et al., "Personal Perspectives on the Evolution of American Black Photography," pp. 10-11.
- 43 Accounts of the ASMP episode appear in Fax, *Seventeen Black Artists*, pp. 181-83; and in David Vestal, "In the Key of Life: Photographs by Roy DeCarava," *Camera Arts*, vol. 3, no. 5 (May 1983), pp. 88-89.
- 44 On the Kamoinge Workshop, see Doniger et al., "Personal Perspectives on the Evolution of Black Photography," pp. 8-17. Two portfolios issued by the Workshop are in the Department of Photography of The Museum of Modern Art, New York. *Kamoinge Workshop Portfolio No. 1* (1964) includes photographs by Bob Clark, Roy DeCarava, Louis Draper, Fennar, Ray Francis, H. Howard, Earl James, James Mannas, Calvin Mercer, Mills, Herbert Randall, Larry Stewart, Shawn W. Walker, and Calvin Wilson. *Kamoinge Workshop Portfolio No. 2* (1964-65) includes photographs by Anthony Barboza, David Carter, Draper, Francis, Howard, Mannas, Randall, Herbert Robinson, Walker, and Wilson.
- 45 See Mary Schmidt Campbell, *Tradition and Conflict: Images of a Turbulent Decade 1963-1973*, exhibition catalogue (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1985), especially pp. 45-50; and Kellie Jones, *Norman Lewis: The Black Paintings*, exhibition catalogue (Newark, N.J.: Robeson Center Gallery, Rutgers University, 1985), pp. 4-5.
- 46 The exhibition was organized under the direction of Allon Schoener, Visual Arts Program Director of the New York State Council on the Arts. The catalogue of the exhibition, originally published in 1968 by Random House, New York, has been reissued with a new foreword by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and an extensive new introduction by Schoener; see *Harlem on My Mind* (New York: The Free Press, 1995).
- 47 See Benny Andrews, "Benny Andrews Journal: A Black Artist's View of Artistic and Political Activism, 1963-1973," in Campbell, *Tradition and Conflict*, pp. 69-73.
- 48 Quoted in David Vestal, Roy DeCarava, Ray Francis, and Margery Mann, "Can Whitey Do a Beautiful Black Picture Show?," *Popular Photography*, vol. 65, no. 5 (May 1969), p. 122.
- 49 Claude Brown, *Manchild in the Promised Land* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), p. 177.
- 50 The first essay to explore this aspect of DeCarava's work was Alvia Wardlaw Short, "Introduction: The Photographer and His Work," in Short, *Roy DeCarava: Photographs*, exhibition catalogue (Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts, 1976), pp. 7-14. See also Wallen, "Reading the Shadows—The Photography of Roy DeCarava."
- 51 James Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son" (1955), in *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1955), pp. 113-14.
- 52 *Ibid.*, p. 94.
- 53 See Roy DeCarava, *The Nation's Capital in Photographs, 1976: Roy DeCarava*, exhibition catalogue (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1976).
- 54 See Renato Danese, ed., *American Images: New Work by Twenty Contemporary Photographers* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), pp. 70-79.
- 55 *Ibid.*, p. 70.
- 56 *Idem.*



1. 117th Street. 1951

Pages from a Notebook

SHERRY TURNER DECARAVA

One Hundred Seventeenth Street is home to a substantial number of people, and for some it is a block with a New York City address as remarkable as any other amongst that group of undifferentiated four- and five-story cold-water flats built around the turn of the nineteenth century. In 1951, the block underwent a major demolition and a large vacant lot appeared like a scar on the street. But that urban desecration in its turn bestowed an unintended renewal, as it allowed a swathe of light to descend softly to the ground, sweeping in its wake a clear view from the 116th Street side and creating an open space of sizable dimension wherein people are revealed as they move through the street (fig. 1).

This early Roy DeCarava photograph is a subtle, restrained image in which apparently nothing seems to happen in the moment that light touches personal endeavor. The cleared space is curtained by the walls of surrounding buildings, and in the windows are indicated small details that compound with a dozen others, from cars to children and adults, to create the narrative elements of the picture. The curtain of buildings, on the other hand, is presented as a range of modulated tones, pushed toward subdued hues—indeed the entire image is in a tonal key—and becomes a singular spatial structure against which the narrative elements can then clearly project themselves. The vast wall focuses the energy of the miniaturized chronicle unfolding before it and, like many of the pictorial devices DeCarava uses, becomes an armature of time, holding the photographic moment in stasis.¹ All the wonderful particu-

lars of the narrative—from flowerpots precariously placed at a window ledge, to the conversation of the moment among neighbors, to the *contraposto* strides of child and woman—then develop their own rhythm and the picture becomes an image more felt or imagined than concretely perceived.

Elfreda Ferguson came to the United States as a seventeen-year-old emigrant from Jamaica. Her father was a carpenter, a person of skilled vocation whose future in turn-of-the-century Jamaica seemed to hold little promise for his seven children. She must have been a determined person of some courage, for she traveled alone and, upon arriving in New York, secured employment and established a life for herself. She married and had one child, Roy, in 1919, subsequently separating from her husband. The demands of working required that she create a surrogate family to foster a sense of stability, however tentative, for herself and her young child. While DeCarava did not know his father, he had the support of this extended family, which allowed him the time to develop with a sense of familial connection.

She encouraged her son in music and art, arranging violin lessons (not a long-lived pursuit, although he continues to study jazz saxophone) and also welcomed a grammar-school teacher's advice to keep art material available, for he had obvious drawing talent. He has early memories of her fierce protectiveness, of being dressed in velvet knickers and artist's smocks, of rebelling to the sidewalk, where, dressed

considerably down, he carried the distinction of being the only chalk artist in the neighborhood. When he finally decided to become an artist and moved out at the age of eighteen into a small apartment on 120th Street in Harlem,² she conditioned her approval with admonitions.

Among her gifts to him was her sense of feisty independence and her spirited enthusiasm for life. She owned a Brownie and tirelessly photographed herself, her friends, and her child. She made thousands of pictures, most of them taken out-of-doors and at long distance. The small snapshots, with their still tinier figures, hardly seem the reward for such involvement, yet this effort to express herself in a foreign land ultimately captured the imagination of her son.

When asked to discuss the artists who were important in the development of his work, Roy DeCarava inevitably will refer to painters, of whom he speaks as though he knew each one in the context of a friendship. He does not talk about specific imagery but more generally

2. *Self-portrait. 1938. Pen-and-ink yearbook drawing*



about the ways in which their individual choices, both as artists and as people, remain to this day sources of inspiration. He discovered the work of Vincent van Gogh in a high-school art-history class, and it was van Gogh's powerful evocation of the human spirit, evident in every stroke of paint, that made a seventeen-year-old artist take notice. When living on his own and experiencing many levels of dispossession, DeCarava felt an immediate relationship to the expatriate Dutch painter of nearly a century earlier (fig. 2). Van Gogh's artistic vision was singular in its empathy for another human being, and, although just a young man, DeCarava intuitively understood the importance of this expression to his own work. As a mature artist thirty years later, continuing to contemplate its nature, he realized that he saw an important link between van Gogh's drawing and painting: "The consummate work ethic of his drawing, the incessant linearity, was necessary for the freedom and plasticity of the later painting."³ Van Gogh's dedication to his craft was consonant with DeCarava's own perceptions about the commitment required for an artist's life and the ability of sustained effort to free the expression being sought.

DeCarava continues to value this work as primary, but there were other artists who also influenced him by virtue of their humanistic concerns. The Mexican muralists made a strong impression on him, for in their paintings he saw the eloquent congruence of artistic form, social concern, and public space. With José Clemente Orozco's art, in particular, he found a powerful intensity carried by a great simplicity.

Other painters interested DeCarava for their heightened perceptions of light, a concern that was becoming important to his visual thinking by the mid 1940s, when he began to photograph. Exposure to the pictorial work of J. M. W. Turner, Thomas Eakins, Edward Hopper, and others, primarily through books, enabled DeCarava to establish during the brief period of 1938 to 1945 a group of personal references for his own direction. Between 1945 and 1947, he began

using the camera as a rapid means of sketching for future paintings. Yet, with the reflex of lifting camera to eye came an uneasy hope:

There were so many ways to work with painting, so many styles and perceptions to incorporate; it was all too much for a beginning student to absorb and use. I wanted to make up for the years lost in a survival environment. Increasingly, I found it difficult to paint.⁴

The graphic qualities that developed in this period of painting and drawing marked the beginning of a personal and artistic breakthrough and would continue to exert influence in subsequent decades devoted to photography (fig. 3). Improvising a photographic language for himself, he began to explore his perceptions that would establish the congruency of classical form and subjective ambivalence in an American reality.

In the years preceding this departure, DeCarava had engaged a number of experiences in art training. His drawing ability had already surfaced in the late 1920s with the curb-to-curb chalk pictures he engineered as a child across the streets of his neighborhood. His early talent coalesced around this graphic sensibility, and was disciplined through commercial art work that trained him in precise line illustration and required exacting technical tolerances for plate engraving (1937–43). By the early 1940s, living and working as a commercial artist in the Bronx, he began keeping a personal notebook which represents his first collection of drawings.⁵

While these drawings from 1943 indicate an understanding of line, they primarily define DeCarava's strong, early focus on economical delineation of character and on the expressive potential of a rendering (fig. 5). He seems to find in the human form and in its isolated gestures those emotional referents one usually searches for in the face (figs. 4, 7; compare with fig. 8). Figural sketches are rarely closed, and they present a sense of boundaries observed, as though the young artist sought to capture the essence of the person but was not so bold as to



3. *Bird on spike*. 1961

imagine he could wholly describe it. The lines are loose yet succinct, and forms assume a provisional stability. The results are figures with quiet vitality, unperturbed by our watching, who seem to move authentically against an expanded moment⁶ (fig. 9).

The drawings develop several themes, among them, common objects used by people (fig. 11), figural stance and strong personality (fig. 10), and a moment of reflection in a given subject that finds resonance with the viewer. This cognizance, in particular, when the exercise of a person's sensibility engages a complex social interaction, may play a role in response to the subject's perception of uncertainty or apprehension (fig. 6). Such expressive moments appear again, years later, in a number of photographic contexts (pages 101, 144) and define a continuing critical intent to make visible



4



5



6



7

4-7. Drawings from a notebook (details). 1943. Pen and ink

unseen psychological dimensions in American social realities.

The notebook also reveals DeCarava's interest in the dynamics of compression and expansion, as they relate to the creation of other figures that convincingly occupy or generate their surrounding space. The drawings suggest that such figure-space constructs offered the possibility of extending the vitality of his solo figures while economically expressing their formal and social connections to the larger structure of the environment. In later years, DeCarava often explored the presence of figures in an elaborate setting, configuring subject matter with deliberate ambiguity between the formal and literal interaction of individual and circumstance in a poetically dense field (page 71).

Viewed as they were often arranged, individual sketches lead to others, creating a visual ensemble (fig. 13). Like the re-creation of a small part of a neighborhood through the eyes of a prescient passerby, they attune one both to the individual encountered and to the sensibility that relationship brings. Not insignificantly, these early drawings also represent two distinct American cultures, white and black, drawn on paper into a social and aesthetic conversation. This conversation would continue to be envisioned in the next five decades of his work. DeCarava suggests in these instances, with simplicity, the believable illusion of a shared emotional context amongst strangers.

Some drawings play with strange juxtapositions of things both common and fantastic, creating overt and odd discontinuities. The drawings depend upon spontaneity, upon intuitive, unrelated discoveries that suggest no logical resolution (fig. 12). These surrealist interests are voiced again in other contexts in the photographic work of the 1960s. DeCarava used them to structure and expose the tangible strangeness of race relations he found erupting from beneath the surface of American life (page 144); the surrealist perspective was integral to his exploration of personal consciousness and urban American culture (fig. 15).

The sketchbook drawings, taken as a whole,



8. *Hand with coat.* c. 1962

establish a lineage with DeCarava's photographic production from the late 1940s. They indicate that key aspects of his aesthetic vocabulary were evident by 1943⁷ and, significantly more than early musings or tentative trials, suggest an open route to the development of a vision that would encompass photography (fig. 14).

Much of Roy DeCarava's time has been circumscribed by the necessity to work. His earliest jobs, as he recalls, started at the age of nine or ten and continued throughout his entire career with the hiatus of only one year. Like many other adults who later took on photography in the World War II era, he was able to garner only a few hours a day for it from what free time he had. Photographing wherever he found himself, early on, his pictures tracked the places, patterns, and rhythms of movements between job, subway, and home.





10



11

9-14. Drawings from a notebook. 1943. Pen and ink,
 $12\frac{3}{8} \times 10\frac{1}{4}$ in. (31.5 x 26.1 cm). Collection of the artist



12



13



A sense of personal order, which the meticulous organization of his work environment reflected, allowed him to prepare independently to address his goals. He was artistically conscious, having studied a wide range of courses, including architecture, sculpture, and painting at The Cooper Union. Continuing his studies with New York artists at the Harlem Art Center,⁸ DeCarava conceived projects that would allow his work to engage the lives of



15. Subway station, Canal Street. 1978

people. On one of his regular visits to his mother he happened, by chance, to see a neighbor whom he felt he would like to photograph, a project that was to begin formally when he received a Guggenheim Foundation stipend in 1952. Under the aegis of that grant, he was able to devote himself full-time for an entire year to photography and, working in his own improvised darkroom, continued the production of a substantial group of pictures.

DeCarava acknowledges this period as an intensely productive and creative time that was to define his manner of working for decades to come. He was thinking visually, exploring the individual in the contexts of family and society and, in the process, opening new territories for himself (figs. 16, 17). *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, published with poet Langston Hughes in 1955

at the height of this period, is an extraordinary book and remains a unique contribution to the photography-text tradition.⁹ DeCarava's images of his community made plainly visible, in this openly segregated time, what many Americans refused, or were unable, to see: People were people—social beings with families, friends, and dreams. He indicated that the conditions of their lives, which were not wholly subject to their control, did not imprison their sense of self. Nor did these conditions have to prevent others from seeing what he saw. DeCarava was able to photograph successfully not with any special dispensation in the world he depicted but because he drew on his own perceptions. It was as if by magic, that with one person's sight, the whole world could see. The book won praise,¹⁰ sold out several times, and was published internationally in foreign-language editions. Hughes's text so adroitly interpreted the pictures that he seemed to transmute vision into voice. Nevertheless, the placement of these voices in Harlem obscures for some an important meaning in the story.

The people of these pictures were not stereotypes meant to please, disarm, or assuage, nor were they noble archetypes to admire. Rather, DeCarava and Hughes found in their commitment to the ordinary pursuits and plans of their lives an extraordinary quality of humanity (page 80). DeCarava has spoken of the early necessity of photographing in Harlem from an artist's sensibility, and he located in this project a commensurate subject. His terms were substantively defined as exploring the visual nature of human life, and after the project's completion he focused seamlessly on a wide range of pictures generated by these formative endeavors.¹¹

In assessing the development of this imagery, it is useful to accept 1947 to 1955 as a time when, as DeCarava was creating a family, he extended that commitment to encompass his photographic work as well. Many visual artists are considered outsiders in their own communities—often, even in their own families—and DeCarava's recollections of his early years bear some congruence to this profile. This intense

period of work on the daily life of family and community served to reconnect him to a milieu he had experienced as a youth only incompletely. It was not until twenty years later, in the 1970s, that he returned to the subject again with a renewed sense of confidence in his own personal space. By this time, however, much of the community context of family he had earlier photographed was suppressed by the cumulative effects of poverty and discrimination. Yet a sense of joy in these later pictures emerges (page 253).

It is also relevant that no one who lived there had photographed the urban environment of DeCarava's neighborhood with anything other than commercial or documentary intent:

There are areas in which force manifests itself in pervasive ways and in quiet ways. Sometimes it is almost imperceptible. It's the force of running water wearing down the rock as opposed to a volcanic force.

There is also another aspect to it—force as the desire and the will by the majority of people in the world to reach sunlight. A drive for life, for fulfillment, is also force. It is stronger than those being used against these people, except the[se] forces are concerted and conscious whereas the will to life is still in its unconscious, intuitive stages.¹²

Perhaps his understanding of the struggle to sustain one's life contributed to the development of his concept of a *portrayal*, which was rooted in the drawings.

Conventionally, there are two primary aspects of portraiture. The first is a likeness achieved with the intent to render the subject by pose. This can be a formulaic pursuit and it did not engage DeCarava's interest. The second seeks less tangible qualities and results in a lesser verisimilitude, a shift away from the importance of physical veracity. It is this second process, an interest in an authentic, engaged persona, that developed in the drawings and was explored in his photographs of people.

Within this context, DeCarava's work de-

finer a unique sensibility on the part of the photographer toward people: It was a leap, a faith in the perceptions of what he saw and felt—one he himself was not afraid to acknowledge. No one had photographed black people in this manner or even as a subject worthy of art. In his mind failure or rejection, even if he succeeded, were ever-present possibilities that carry a particularly poignant reading in the lives of Afro-American artists. That photogra-



16. Man on elevated.
1952

phy had a checkered existence as an art form made the undertaking more complicated; that the subject of Harlem was generally accepted only on sociological terms made a receptive audience that much more elusive. The situation might have called for a clear directorial mode. However, the photographic ethos to direct is missing from these pictures, replaced by DeCarava's belief in the strength of the creative process. In the end, DeCarava captured a flow of life that allowed individuals to surface and be seen. Hughes perceived these qualities and responded, producing fictional portraits that equaled the photographs, as imaginative play between words and images welded fiction and reality into rare insight.

The vitality of DeCarava's photographic por-

trayals, first established in his early drawings, and of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* as a book, originates from the strength of the pictures, which depict more than just ordinary moments of everyday people. The critical point is that these were *private* and *real* moments and the time he captured has a living quality to it (page 86). There were no barriers between the photographer and the subject, no sense that the photographer was even there.



17. Traffic light and fog.
1950

During this period of the 1950s and extending through the 1970s, a similar portrayal of the city emerges from his field of vision as he approached a broader engagement of the photographic process. The visual language of the interior and exterior places of his images reaches a heightened expression with a turn toward more intense perception. It is not surprising, therefore, that in this period he develops subjects focusing particularly on jazz music, work, and relationships between people, while individuals in love and a search for expressive aspects of light also receive significant attention. The photographs follow the

rhythm of working jazz musicians (page 224) while similarly assaying nature scenes and unpeopled cityscapes, but eventually music finds special emphasis. As a complement to the sole exploration of individual activity, DeCarava sought a way to render a more complex imagery of this music and the people who make it, dedicating over a decade as a thoughtful listener and seer to producing a 400-print collection, a portion of which was exhibited twenty years later as *The Sound I Saw*¹³ (page 221).

Many of these jazz photographs were taken in situations of very low light and, as he does not find the descriptive values of artificial light or flash useful, the pictures represent his struggle to find a way to make images speak through the darkness of their origin. DeCarava developed an understanding of how to use these tones to expand space by keeping a level of light in them and avoiding opacity.¹⁴ Rather than implying black walls that prohibit entry, the dark spaces tend to convey an openness that invites (pages 112, 219). He also created pictures whose formal requirements employed other ranges of photography's silver spectrum. While his work is usually associated with darkly toned imagery, this represents only a portion of his scale and, further, the assumption tends to conflict with his ability to explore relationships between opposing tones (page 227). Mastery of tonal range expanded a territory previously informed by graphic training and continued to expand in several directions.

At times the search for these illuminating qualities of light occupied him inclusively, and the mystery of these pictures appears even when they seem to readily define specific imagery. One light suggests a steady, generative, sunlike force that brokers both delicacy and strength in the plebian geometry of a subway ceiling (fig. 18). Another image, *Dark water* (1960; page 235), is a meditation on the luminous possibilities carried by the motion of water and reveals their calligraphic signatures. Both images exist in the range of light's ability to express many potentials, yet convey the query of a single expressive sensibility.

While a musician's connection to his work is one aspect of the human capacity to create meaningful relationships with an endeavor itself and the communal opportunities it affords, this issue of relatedness develops in several directions. Beginning in the 1950s and extending through the 1960s and 1970s, it is significantly concretized in the portrayal of the subject of a couple. DeCarava created a group of pictures about romantic love that is both realistic and sensuous, embracing an acuity of visual and emotional observation (pages 79, 93, 114, 157, 181, 265), challenging notions of intimacy.

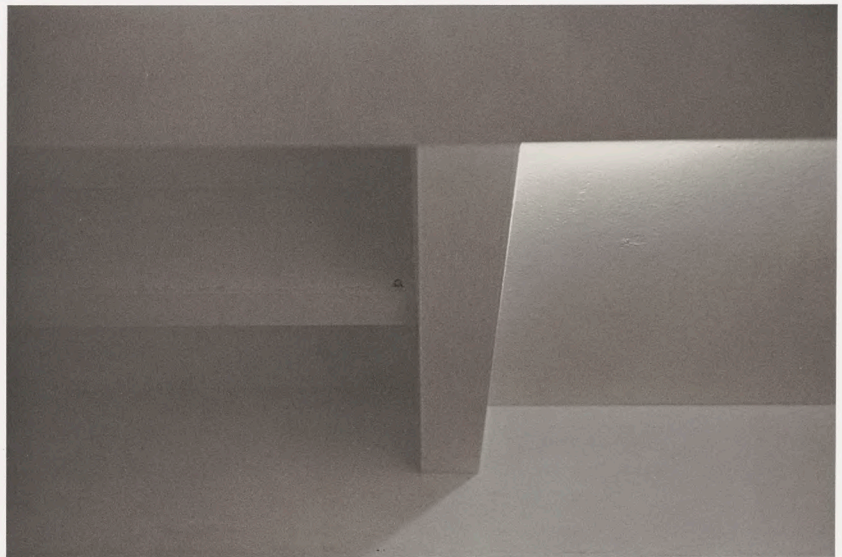
When citizens took to the streets *en masse* in the middle and late 1960s, DeCarava found another context through which he could envision people's relationships to each other and the social imperatives of the times. He proposed both the individual and communal responsibility of the artist, and his work, uncharacteristic of a mass movement, found power in a visual course (pages 161, 193, 194-98), more serene than turbulent.

Two important issues anchor his study of people in political movements: civil rights, presented in the March on Washington (1963) and demonstrations at Downstate Medical Center (1963) involving urban renewal evictions in a Brooklyn black community; and second, issues concerning world peace. The relationship between people and social issues, however, had been explored earlier in both his drawings and the Guggenheim-period pictures, when he focused on the image of an individual who speaks. In these photographs, there may be a gathering of such force that the body and face are dynamically compressed, even contorted (pages 16, 106).¹⁵

It is essential to compare these speakers for justice to DeCarava's images of singers and musicians who have become powerful instruments for expressive communication. They also raise the given voice to levels of lyric intensity. While the nature of political movements and protest often focuses, indeed demands, physical action, DeCarava's photographs transmute the fiery commitment to justice into a mutable

river of equal force. Emanating from the human voice, this energy becomes visualized in the torsion of the stance, in the blur and intensity of the face, transforming the person into The Speaker, The Preacher, The Teller of Truth, a cultural persona of long tradition in Afro-American life who maintains the thread of a broken history with a powerful narration.

DeCarava suggests with this approach that in those human experiences which are less



18. *Subway ceiling, 1964*

amenable to the editorial processes of art, the artist must use minimal constructs and allow the individual testifying to be heard. At the same time, he implies that this specific enriches the artist's entire vocabulary as beauty emerges from its source. The finding of the political voice through vision eventually becomes part of a larger process, emphasized particularly in recent work, where DeCarava uses vision mnemonically to evoke other human senses, linking people to a heightened awareness of themselves and their world (fig. 21).

The drawings establish the earliest commitment to such depiction and serve as references for the development of these themes beginning in the 1950s, as is suggested by other pictures that pursued visual and social incongruities.



19. *Girl looking back.*
1951

Workers of the New York garment district and business people in neighboring corporate skyscrapers presented social dichotomies as he walked in the area or looked on from the fourth-floor front window of his Sixth Avenue loft above Thirty-eighth Street (page 186). When necessary, DeCarava constructed these realities into emblems, metaphoric prisons of graphic compression (page 187). Yet, there is a liberated drive in the work, a critical analysis, carried in the artist's perception of a dancelike struggle across the clear and clogged spaces of a dangerous environment (page 185), finding even with the unrelenting burden of inequality the strength of work.

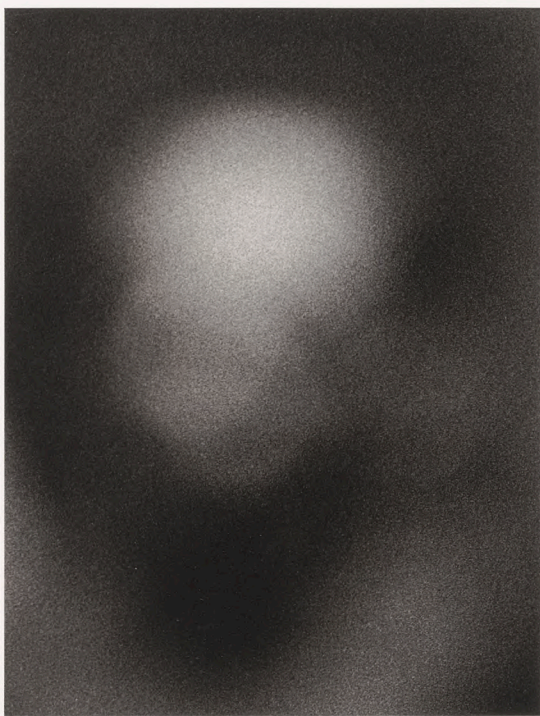
While the connection with humanity in this labor emerges as a powerful and centered voice, a formal diversity develops that gives the period of the 1960s and 1970s a look of visual pluralism (compare pages 173, 259). Singularity of style is one expectation of artistic development. It is an issue particularly pertinent to photography since, given the process, defining a subject can be easily or superficially indicated and then facily duplicated. DeCarava eschews this expectation, setting aside the question of one style, and insists that "no two pictures are

alike, each image has its own fingerprints, its own dynamic. I can't make pictures by formula; one looks at something and senses its organization, it tells you what you must do."¹⁶ He insists on the freedom to create work based on how he perceives the structure and meaning inherent in an image. In effect, DeCarava's creative drive reinterprets his way of seeing, resulting in pictures that, while they appear to lack a classic sense of singular style, instead emphasize his active participation as an artist rather than as a neutral observer. What makes DeCarava's images so recognizable then is not stylistic unity *per se*, although their formal qualities are readily apparent and persuasive, but rather the strength of a singular vision based on the formal language embedded in his emotional and social thought.

From the period of his earliest images, this language developed through DeCarava's portrayal of the unity of the physical and the spiritual: an implacable view of the sacred ordinary in the meaning of a stance, or the individual gesture or expression, and the ultimate nuances of communication that are moments of an open world (fig. 19; pages 156, 197, 220, 241). He rendered the heightened visual sense of these images with a deft certainty of content and execution. While formalities within each picture influence visual design, increasingly during the 1980s these also include laws of the physical world that control visible appearances. Thus *Hoyt and Schermerhorn* (1985; page 113) becomes a study of gravitational sensations in equal measure to its definition as a contemplative urban space. In photographs from the 1980s, movement often blurs a person, a group, or even the background, giving the subject an appearance of being in a prolonged state of suspended time (pages 262, 267). Spatial structures that previously organized and anchored the narratives start to dissolve; narrative particulars that expressed the flow tend to be submerged. By diminishing earlier kinds of pictorial clarity, the pictures explore a visual freedom and open the possibility of a more intimate experience with the image. In *Wendy and*

Laura (1994; fig. 21), for instance, the movement of the wind in an unpictured tree sends a blur of branch and leaf shadows to the pavement, where two stilled figures cull a moment of awareness of the world and each other, as the viewer becomes conscious of their relationship.

Fineness of grain is of value in the lexicon of descriptive photography. However, when the photographer explores the landscape of emotions, as does DeCarava, then grain becomes a tool that he can selectively employ. Focus, blur, and motion are other techniques used to produce a visible texture that can diffuse the descriptive aspect of the field. They become carriers or boundaries of light, allowing feeling to emerge unencumbered by an all-consuming descriptiveness (page 135). In addition to their importance in the pictorial plane as transporters of textures, a raw, essential quality starts to emerge with the field of tangible particles. Even in early periods of his photography, DeCarava indicated an interest in light-filled, grain-impregnated surfaces and their communicative possibilities (fig. 20). However, narra-



20. *Face out of focus*. c. 1963



21. *Wendy and Laura*. 1994

tive elements of the 1950s, picturing the declarative materiality of the world, often established greater visibility. His images continue to speak from hard and soft edges, from the descriptive and the imprecise, and his recent work renews the earlier interest in exploring the pictorial qualities of the variable surface. Broadening his possibilities of interpretation, the photographer suggests a physical ambiguity that can enlarge his own and the viewer's response.

One finds in many recent pictures that the exterior world in which people live is not so much depicted as perceived in states of flux and subtle disequilibrium (fig. 22). This is a basic sensation and potent metaphor. The photographs beckon one to see a shifting tone, to explore the value of balance, and to acknowledge the person who miraculously navigates it. Balance may be resolved by the simple act of an individual's stance, or by the strength in an animal's glance (fig. 23). These gestures discover and enact personal equilibrium and thereby anchor the self in a state of acuity. The figures appear to be listening.

In the world of concrete from which we fashion much of our cities and our busy lives, if one looks, it is possible to locate a particular image that can appear as a figure in a moment



22. *Soft hat*. 1994

of stasis (fig. 24). It may be buried in some connection with the world or self. It can simply exist in the vitality of interchanging dark and light tones. It has an individuality but we do not need to confront it face-forward, for it carries its own code, a barely perceptible drawing embedded in a gritty, grainy pavement—the value of a single human life, on bike and rolling.

Since the late 1940s Roy DeCarava has created visually acute, thought-provoking images from unexpected places. His creative intent was founded on his belief in a human-centered world and was shaped through formal language expressed initially in drawing and painting. He developed a perception of photographic tonality and time that carried a richness and a restraint into the images, enabling a quiet emotional gestalt to emerge. Many of his depictions of people in exterior and interior places appear as memories of those whom he observed grow-

ing up in different neighborhoods around and contiguous to Harlem, and other metropolitan areas of the city. Yet, even when images contain biographical references of these times, they reach beyond an individual dimension.

As he often turns his camera toward modern American urban life, DeCarava's work breaches that visual dissonance with the act of defining both its verity and its beauty. Between things that transmute themselves—a wall that becomes a stage, or a storyline, or the carrier of time or of ambiguous shadows—"beauty is a subject and justice lies within it."¹⁷ This consonance represents an elemental structure in his images and imparts solidity and resonance to the work. However, there is an implied duality. While people are at the center of his vision, the work may equally express the sensibility of the dark. Largely situated within the anonymity of a late-twentieth-century urban environment, the images nevertheless find an intimate space at the core of their meaning. The pictures can portray a single, isolated individual, yet they set in motion a circuit of feeling that encloses viewer, photographer, and subject in the delicate rigor of human understanding. In the midst of the modern, DeCarava reinvents the classical, and vice versa. Looking back across fifty years of work that began with pen-and-ink drawings, there is a unity of vision and meaning evident, a process extending through to the development of the photographs. Yet it is equally certain that when DeCarava replaced drawing and painting with photography, he walked out of his studio and gained another vision of the world, one that was more fully sensate and open to his perception (fig. 25). In this sense, his work invites us to see, to experience the feelings fundamental to living, and contains the hope that visual contemplation will connect us to the flow of reality and the possibility of dreams.



23. *Crystal. 1994*



24. *Figure, bike path. 1994*



25. *Water, sunbeams.*
c. 1960

NOTES

- 1 A number of writers have commented on the particular visual contributions of DeCarava's work. In the first major review of a DeCarava exhibition published, journalist A. D. Coleman devoted significant space to presenting its aesthetic qualities ("Roy DeCarava: Thru Black Eyes," *Popular Photography*, vol. 66, no. 4 [April 1970]). Coleman, Mary Schmidt Campbell, and Daniel Dawson revisited these issues in the catalogue of the exhibition *The Sound I Saw* (1983), while Elton Fax presented summaries of taped interviews with the artist discussing DeCarava's approach in the first biographical essay on his life and career (*Seventeen Black Artists* [New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1971]). I am indebted to their discussions as well as to those extensive statements, published and unpublished, made by the artist during twenty-five years of formal interviews and ad hoc discussions with this author. An extensive discussion of the structural devices in DeCarava's pictures and how they convey meaning is contained in my essay "Celebration," in James Alinder, ed., *Roy DeCarava: Photographs* (Carmel, Calif.: The Friends of Photography, 1981). The essay treats such formal devices and themes as wall, montage, selective focus, and kaleidoscopic and close-framed composition, among others.
- 2 Previously, DeCarava had lived in essentially multiethnic neighborhoods that were Hispanic, Irish, Italian, and marginally Afro-American, moving with his mother to a segregated area of South Harlem at age twelve. By his twenties, he had returned to a multiethnic neighborhood in the Bronx. Subsequently, he lived in midtown and downtown Manhattan, relocating permanently to Brooklyn in 1970. The New York photographs were taken in these and many other areas of the city.
- 3 Personal communication, August 15, 1994.
- 4 Personal communication, July 20, 1995.
- 5 The book, dated between 1943 and 1949, contains several dozen drawings and represents the last surviving collection of this early work. While it is technically a sketchbook, DeCarava has always referred to it as his notebook, a title that suggests it was more like a visual journal important in his education, rather than simply a loose compilation of sketches. The book, stored in an old packing box for decades, was only recently rediscovered.
- 6 An "expanded moment" describes a time of peak perception when a photographer captures a moment of stasis contained within a sense of flow. One can perceive the vitality of a subject framed in an instant of expansive stillness. While contemplation does not necessarily produce such temporal disruption, in this case I am suggesting that the artist has structured such a perception into his work through a developed intuitive sense. One might argue that this is possible in the work of any photographer; however, it is also plausible that some artists are especially capable of eliciting this observer response from the formal structure of their own work. As a concept, the expanded moment reflects DeCarava's interest in the laws of physics and his tendency to be aware of such laws as they affect his photographic process. See *Roy DeCarava: Photographs* (1981), p. 19, "pole vaulter" quotation.
- 7 One of the qualities of DeCarava's early photographic work is that the images are fully realized; from the beginning he made successful pictures, since the visual process had been practiced in the drawings and paintings for years before. This also may explain why his photography, while generally alluding to the traditions of naturalism in the documentary approach, has never fit fully or comfortably in that category. His image-making had a different set of precepts; the drawings are not particularly photographic and the photographs share the qualities of the drawings. It has been no less problematic to accept his work as representing "street photography" or "black photography," since the breadth and content of his images, as well as their locale, posit other definitions of his working process and, ultimately, of the photographer. DeCarava finds it difficult to accept these terms as descriptive of his work, remarking on the subject in the PBS documentary *Conversations with Roy DeCarava* (1983).

- 8 The Harlem Community Art Center (1937–42), located at the corner of 125th Street and Lenox Avenue, was part of a government-sponsored Works Progress Administration project and, along with the George Washington Carver Art School, which he also attended at this time, featured one of the only racially integrated art faculties in New York and perhaps nationwide. The schools included painters Norman Lewis and Elton Fax, the graphic artist Charles White, and others.
- 9 The concept and title of the book were suggested by Langston Hughes, who based the idea on DeCarava's photographs taken before and after the Guggenheim grant of 1952. There was no other book in the American publishing lexicon that followed the construction or subject matter of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*. Margaret Bourke-White's *You Have Seen Their Faces* (with Erskine Caldwell; New York: Viking Press, 1937) featured photographs and journalistic text about American poverty and had a documentary point of view. Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States* (New York: Viking Press, 1941) was a survey and political commentary on the condition of black Americans using Farm Security Administration photographs and an extended historical documentary essay.
- 10 The book received praise from the *New York Herald Tribune* and *The New York Times Book Review* in 1955.
- 11 The success of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* also tended to define DeCarava as a "Harlem photographer," an apparent reference to ethnicity, since members of the Photo League, including Aaron Siskind, had photographed in Harlem, but they were not similarly characterized. This process kept the public perception of DeCarava's work confined to one subject and effectively limited his publishing prospects. After *Sweet Flypaper*, it was twenty-six years before a publisher agreed to issue his work in book form again (*Roy DeCarava: Photographs*, published by The Friends of Photography in 1981). Yet the absence of publishing venues did not adversely affect his artistic production during this time.
- 12 *Roy DeCarava: Photographs* (1981), pp. 18–19.
- 13 *The Sound I Saw*, a 125-print exhibition at The Studio Museum in Harlem in 1983, included thirty years of DeCarava's jazz imagery. The title originated from an unpublished photo-text manuscript authored by DeCarava in 1964.
- 14 DeCarava has spoken about how he utilizes a range of perceptions, darkroom techniques, and exposure to achieve this effect. See *Roy DeCarava: Photographs* (1981), p. 12, "gray tones" quotation.
- 15 Other speakers photographed by DeCarava include P.C. Davis (not in the present exhibition), who was often seen at 125th Street and Seventh Avenue, in front of Michaux's Bookstore, and was legendary as a Harlem street orator. Amy Mallard, the wife of a young Afro-American teacher, who witnessed her husband's death when he was pulled from his car and fatally shot by local police, undertook a nationwide campaign, with the help of the NAACP, to inform Americans about her struggle for justice. The photograph *Amy Mallard* (c. 1949) exists in two versions, one at close focus and the second taken at a distance.
- 16 Personal communication, February 12, 1995.
- 17 Personal communication, February 13, 1995.

Plates





Car behind building. 1953





Boy looking in doorway. 1950





Skylight. 1965





Windows, Hunter College West. 1989









Two boys talking, crowd. 1985





Woman and children at intersection. 1952





Man sitting on stoop with baby. 1952





Girl and boy talking. 1952





Mrs. Morton sewing. 1951





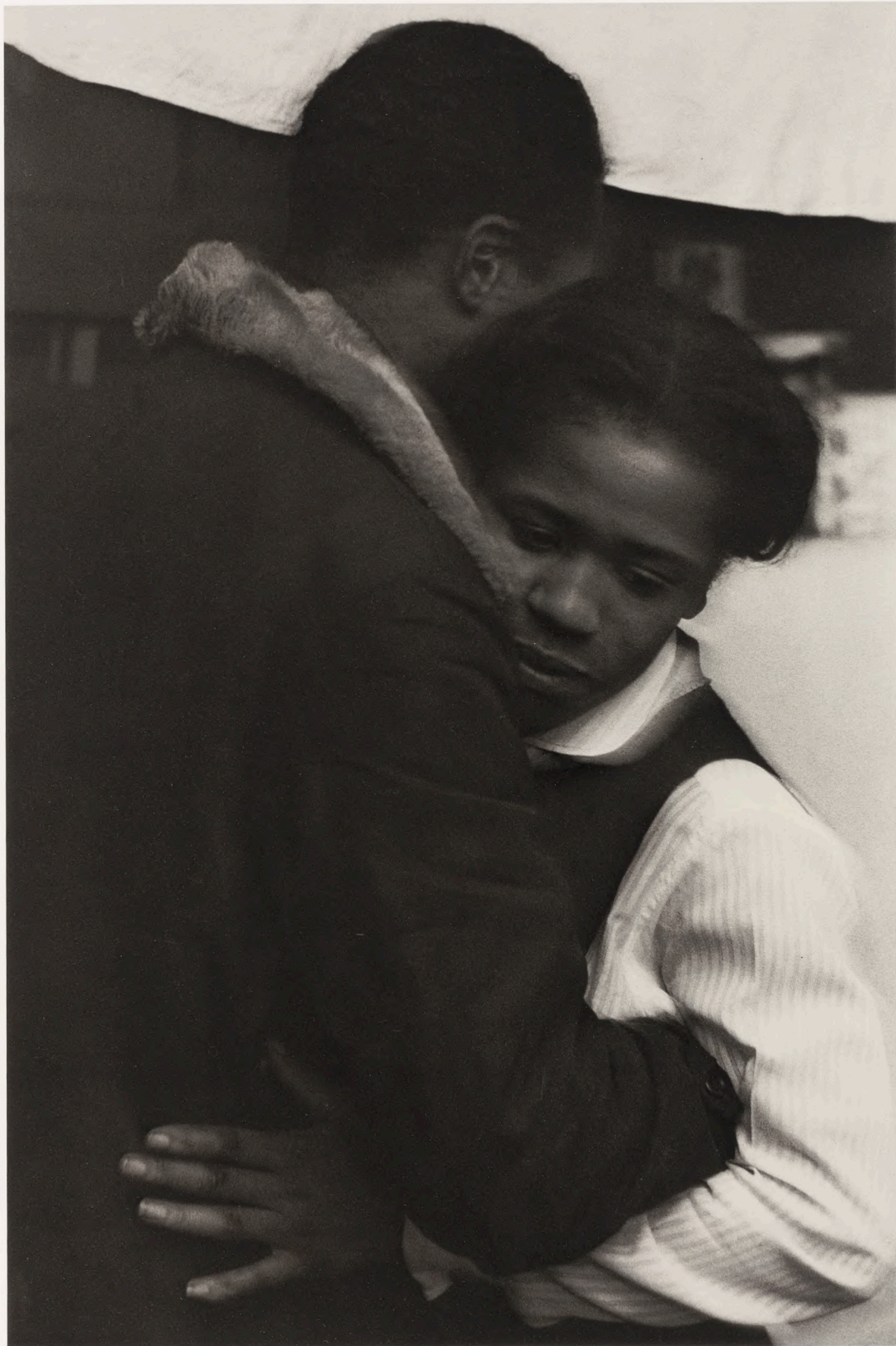
Elfreda. 1953





Window and stove. 1951





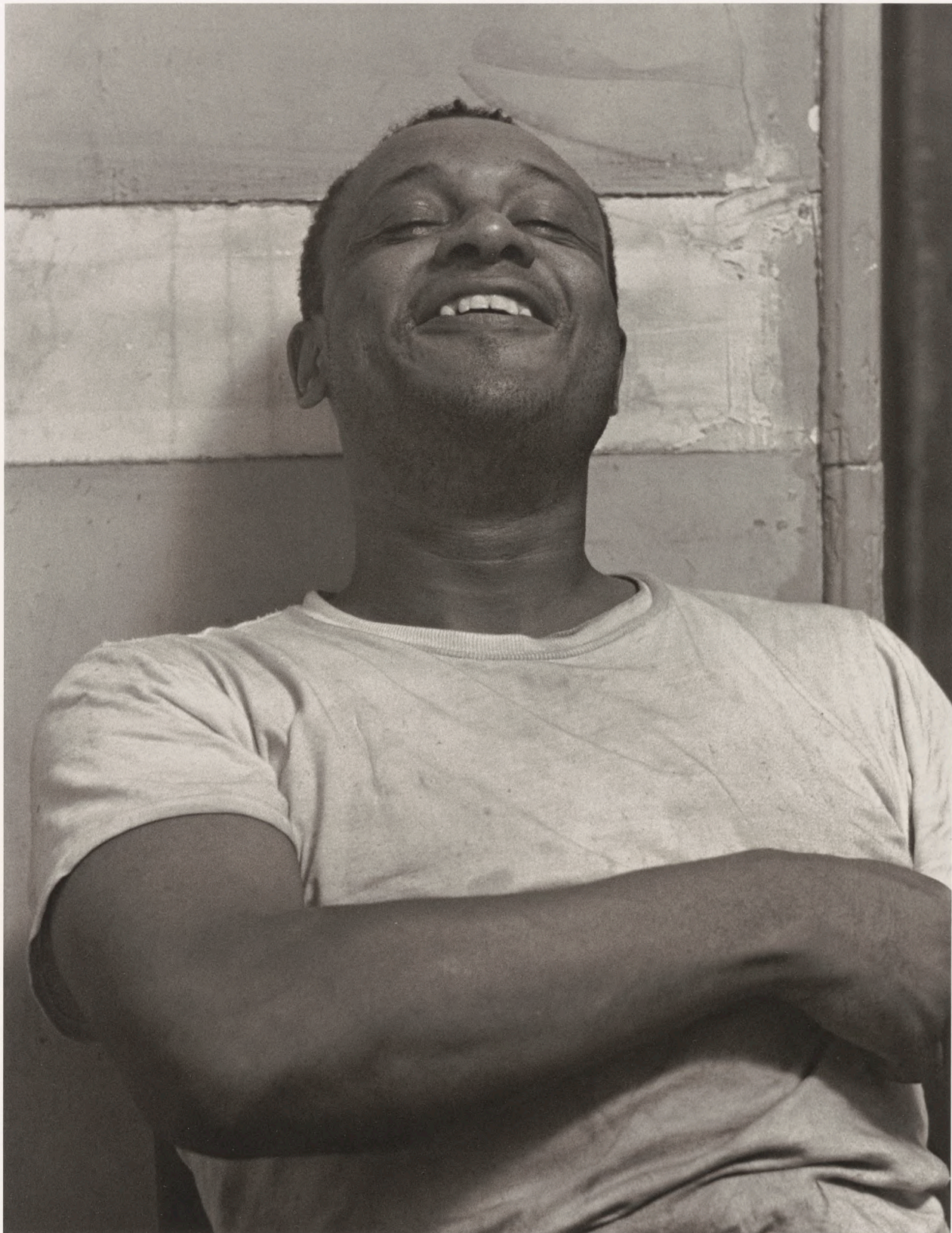
Couple dancing. 1953





Julia and children at kitchen table. 1953





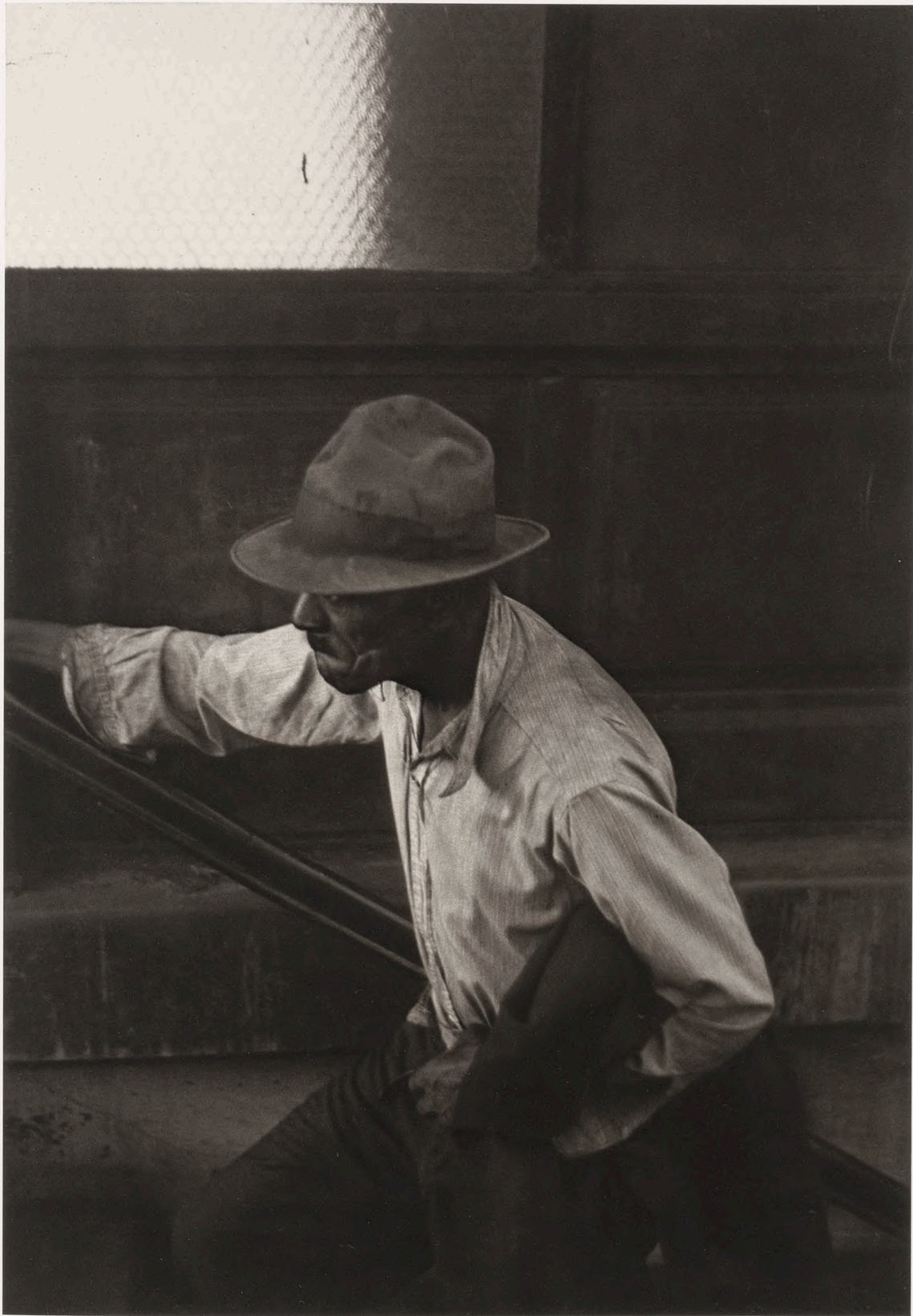
Sam laughing. 1952





Shirley embracing Sam. 1952





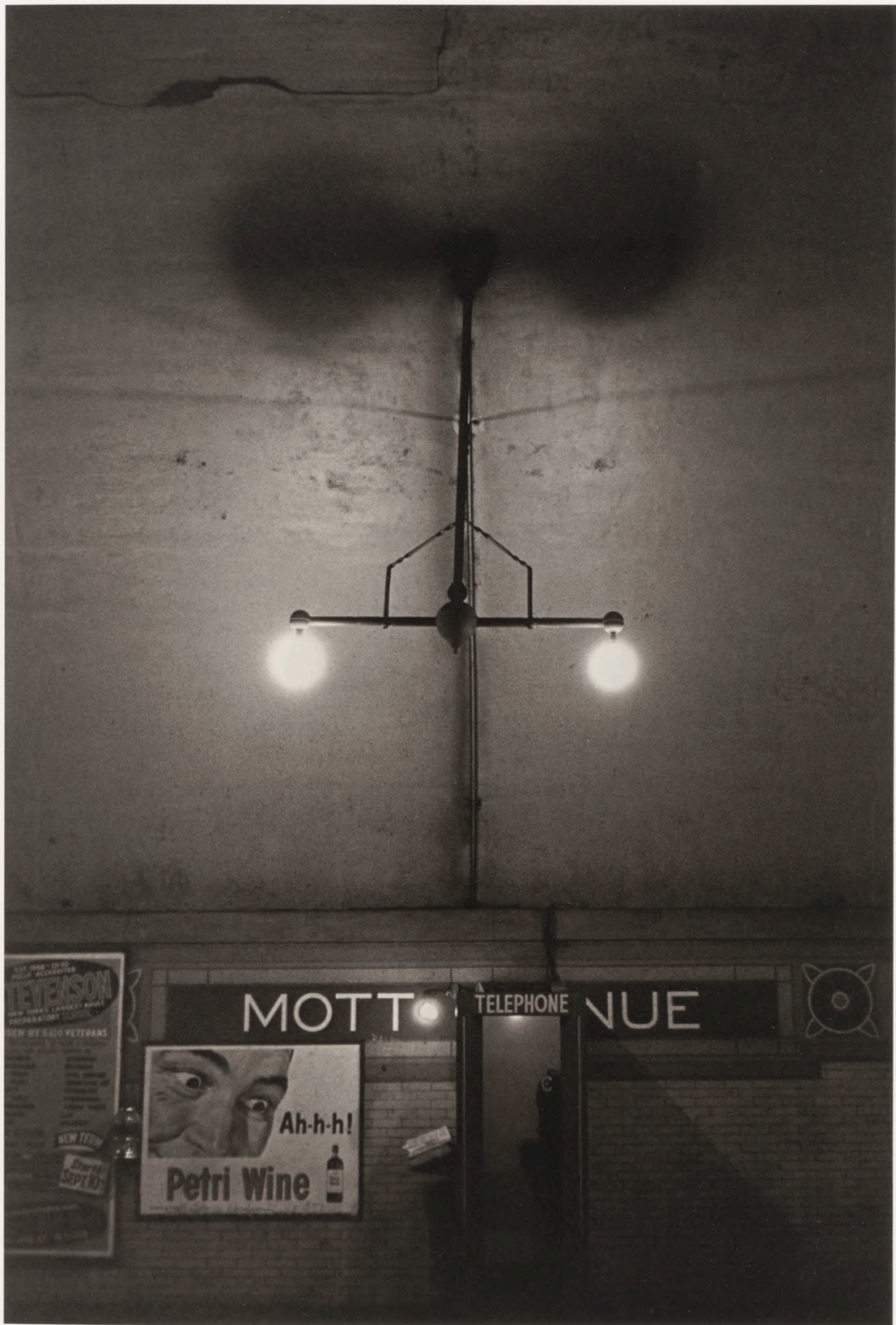
Man coming up subway stairs. 1952





Two men, subway stairs. 1987





Mott Avenue. 1951





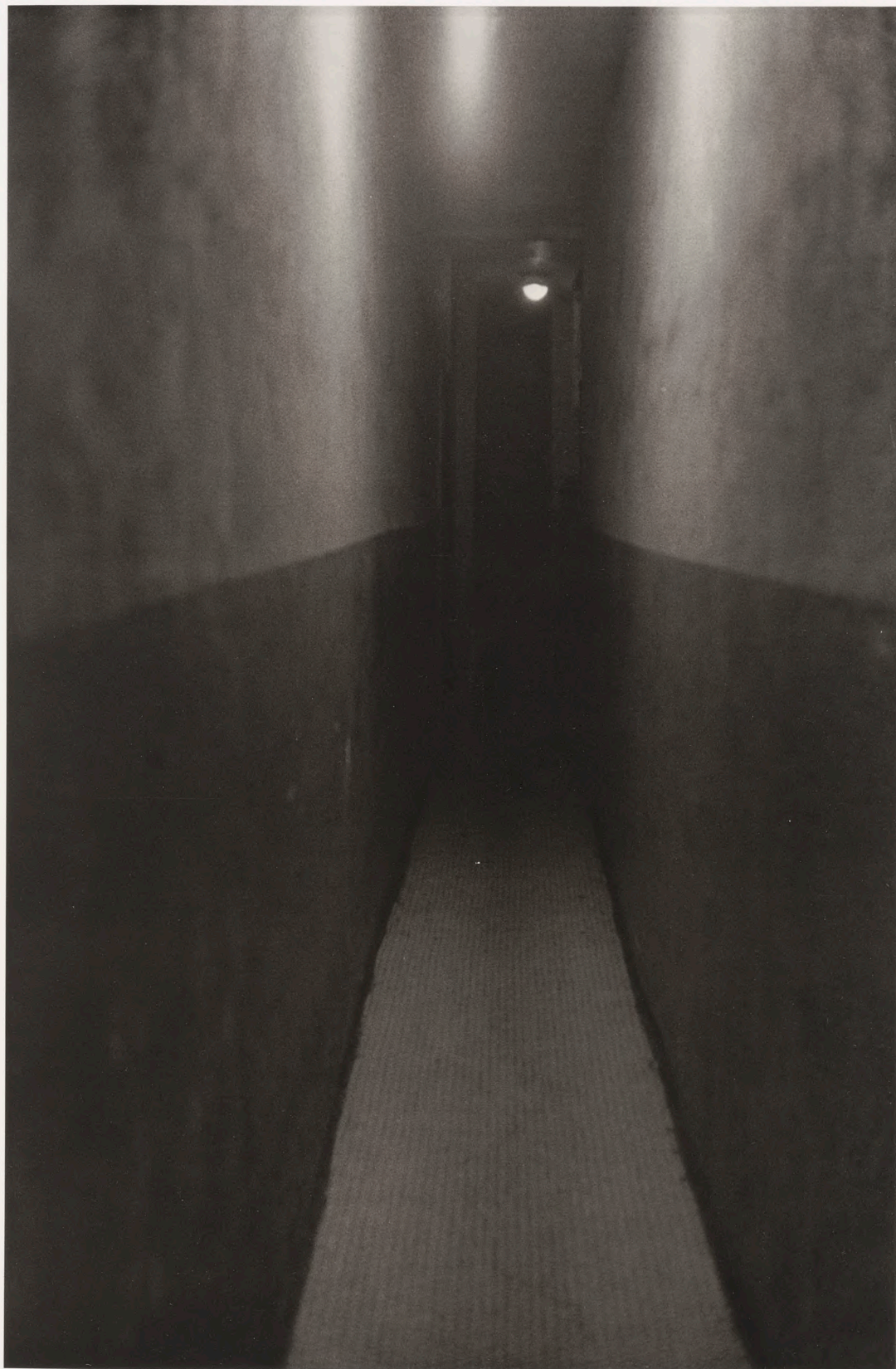
Woman on train. 1961



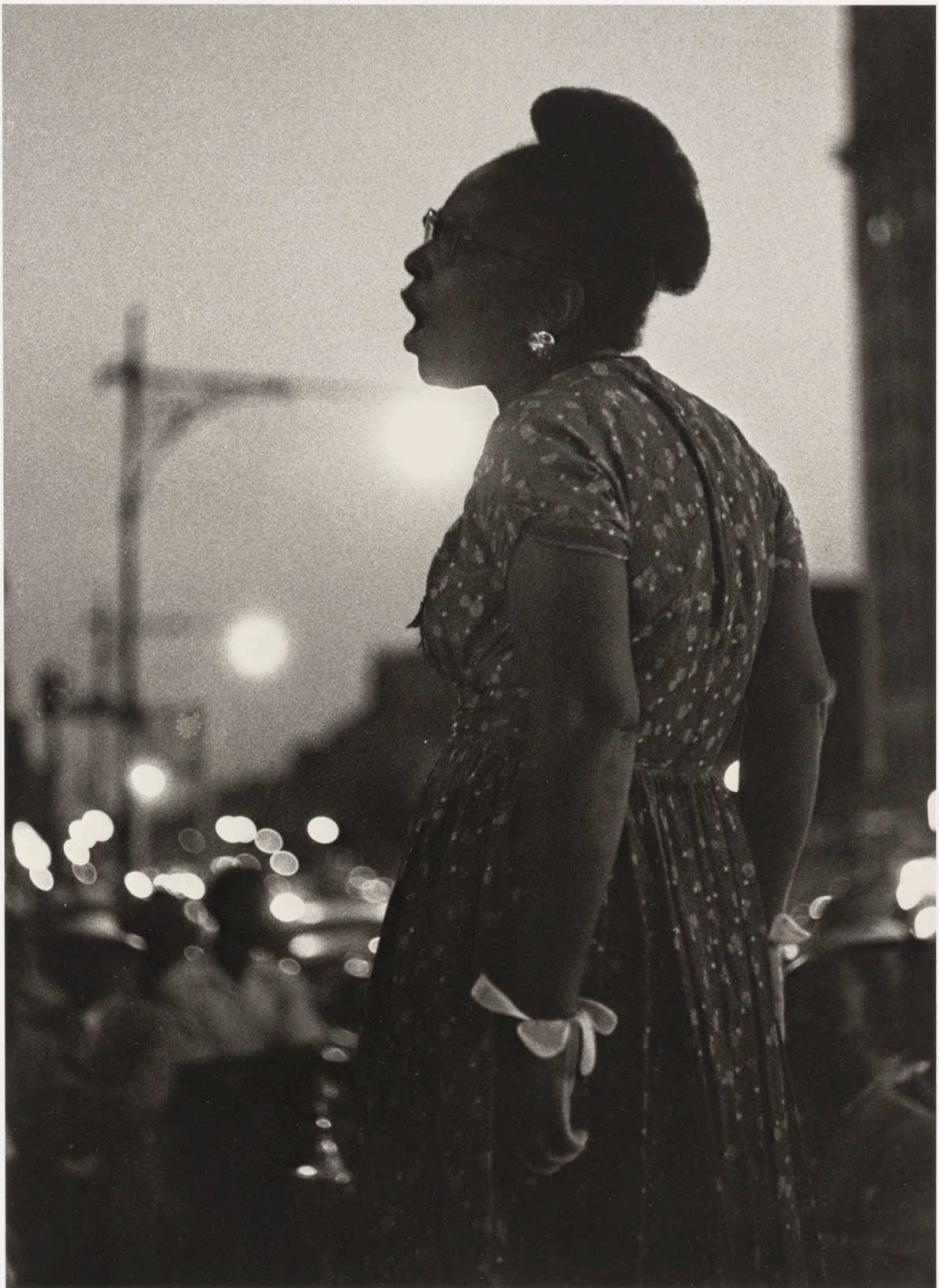


Man lying down, subway steps. 1965





Hallway. 1953





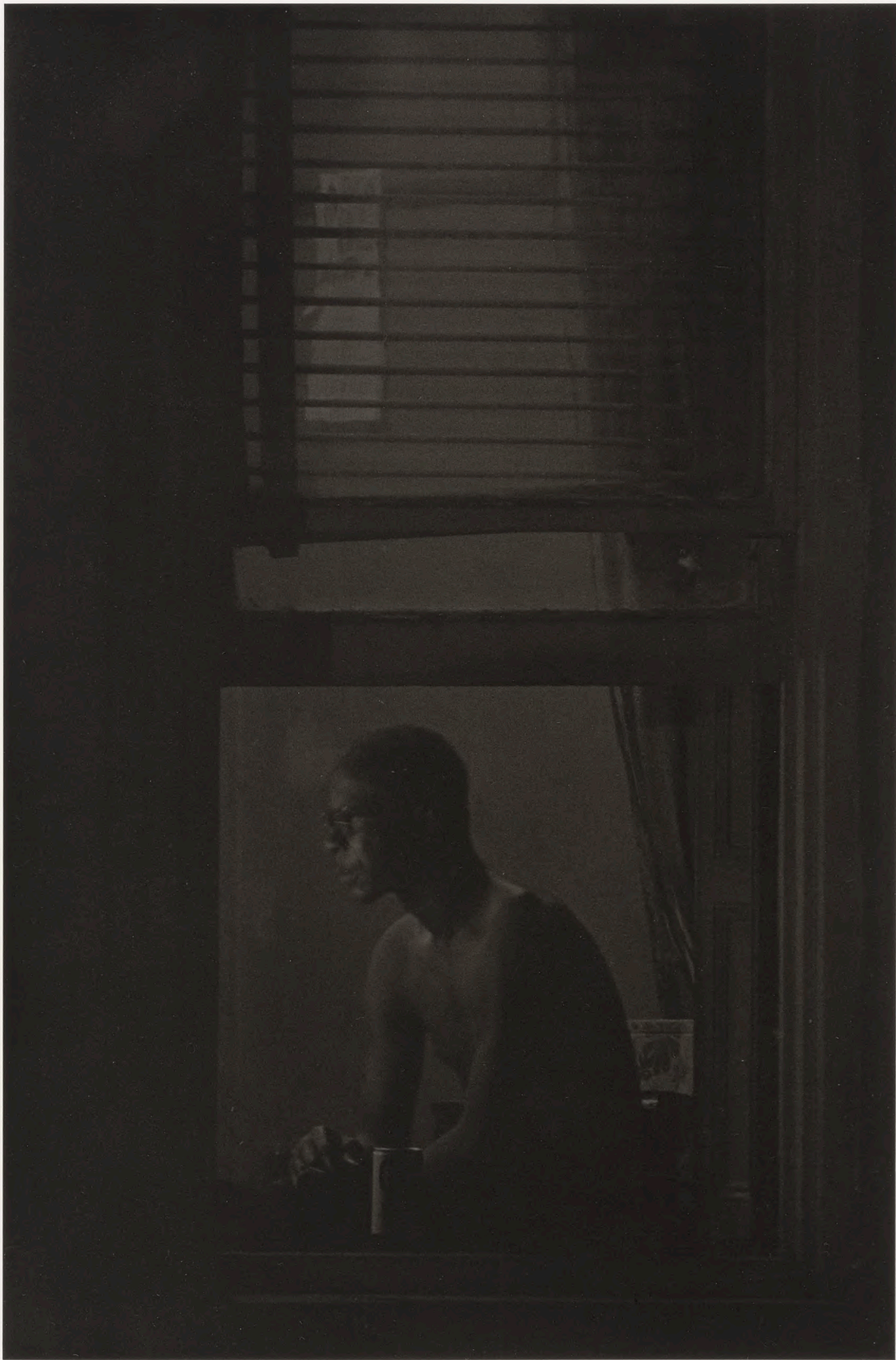
Edna Smith, bassist. 1950





Woman on bench at night. 1956





Man in window. 1978









Hotel. 1962





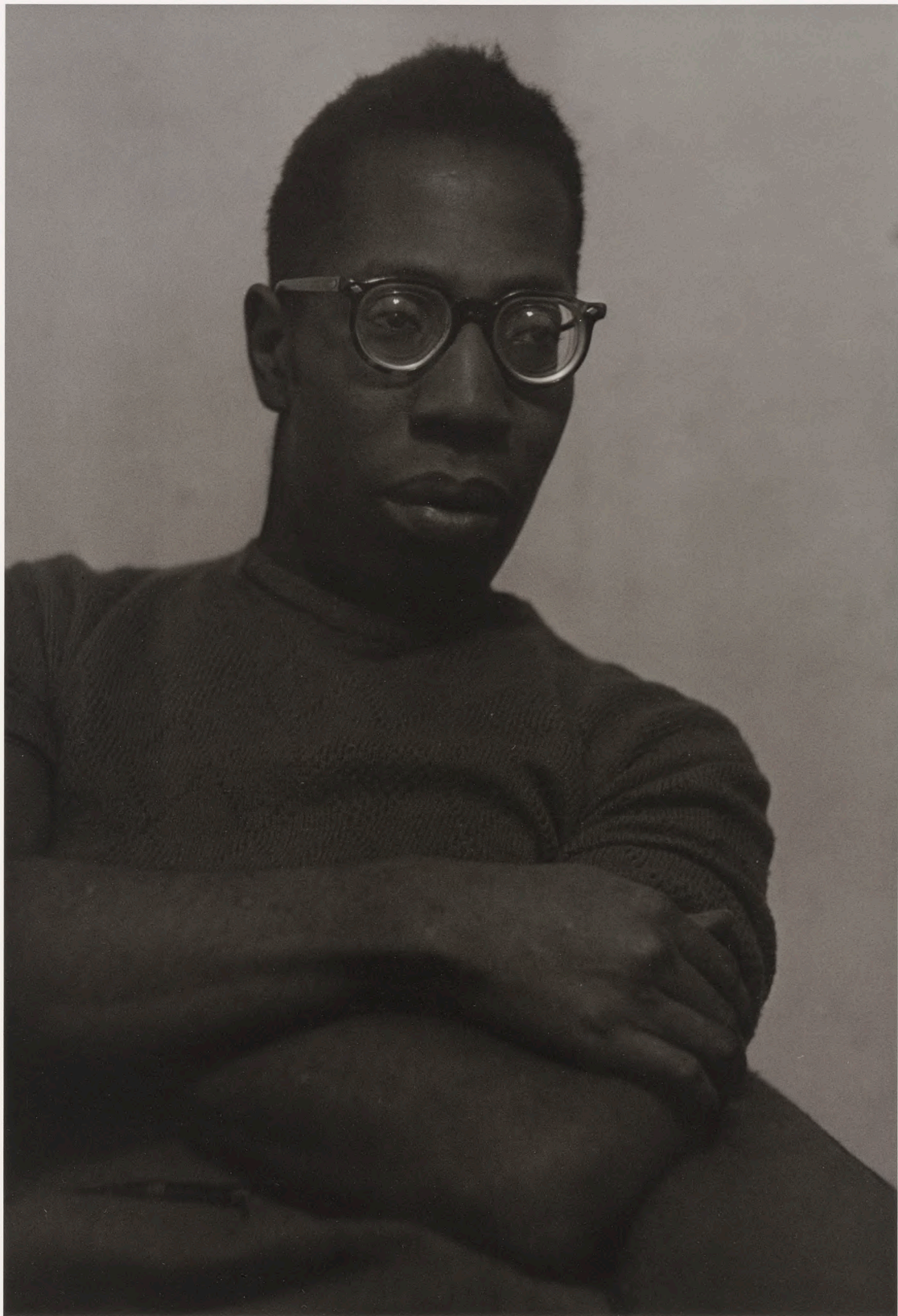
Billie Holiday. 1952





Paul Robeson. 1954



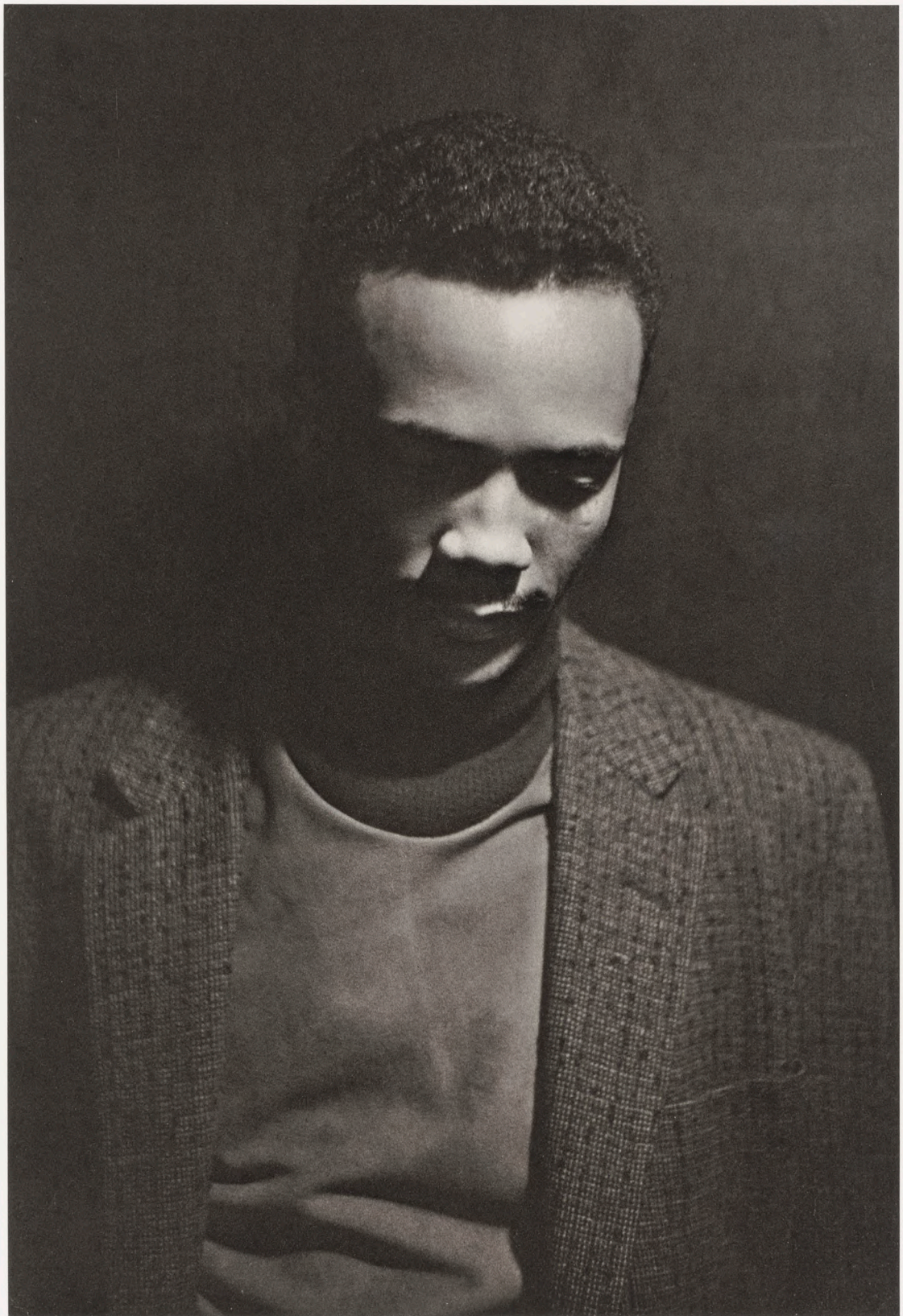


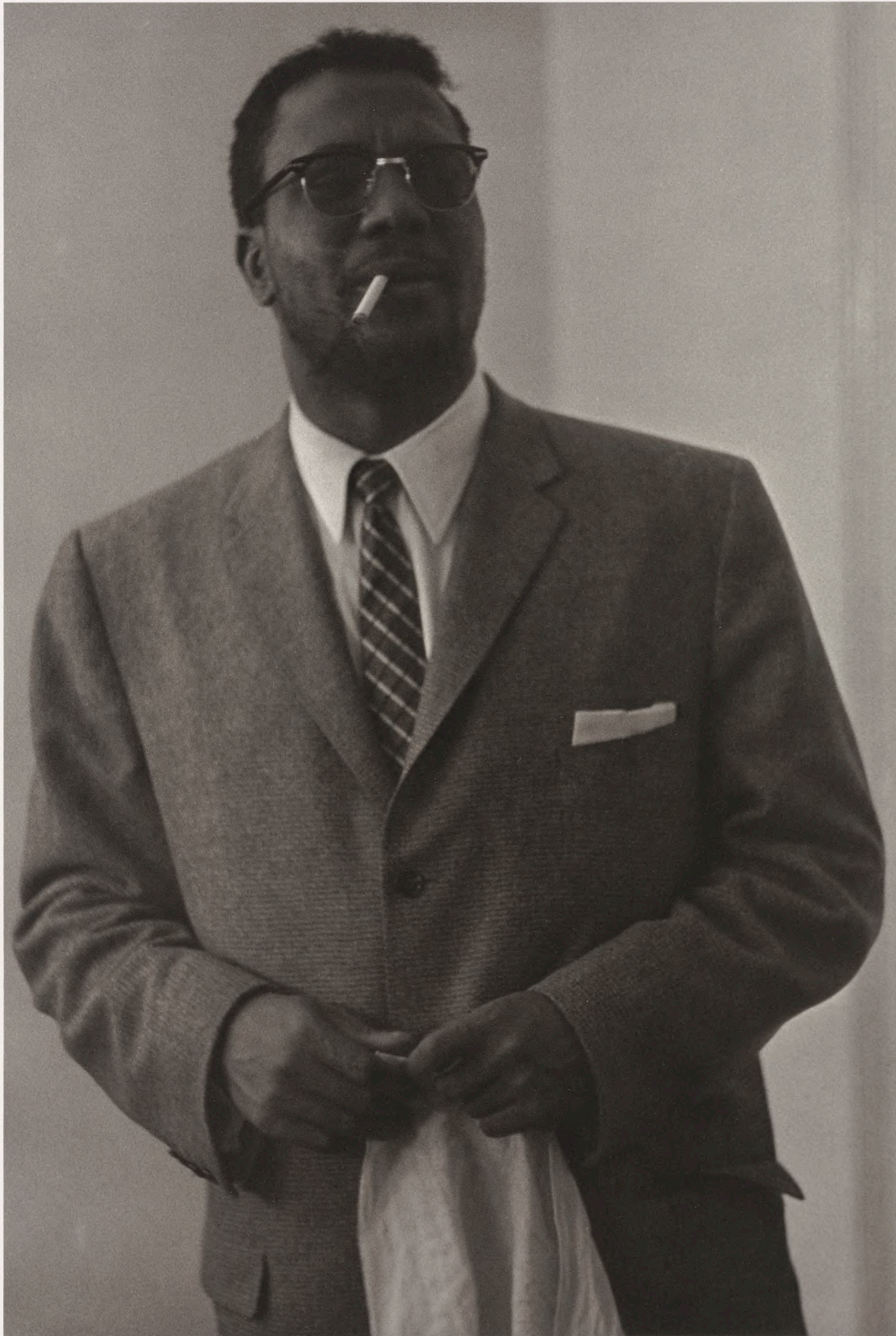
Robert Blackburn. 1955





Duke Ellington. 1967





Thelonious Monk. 1955





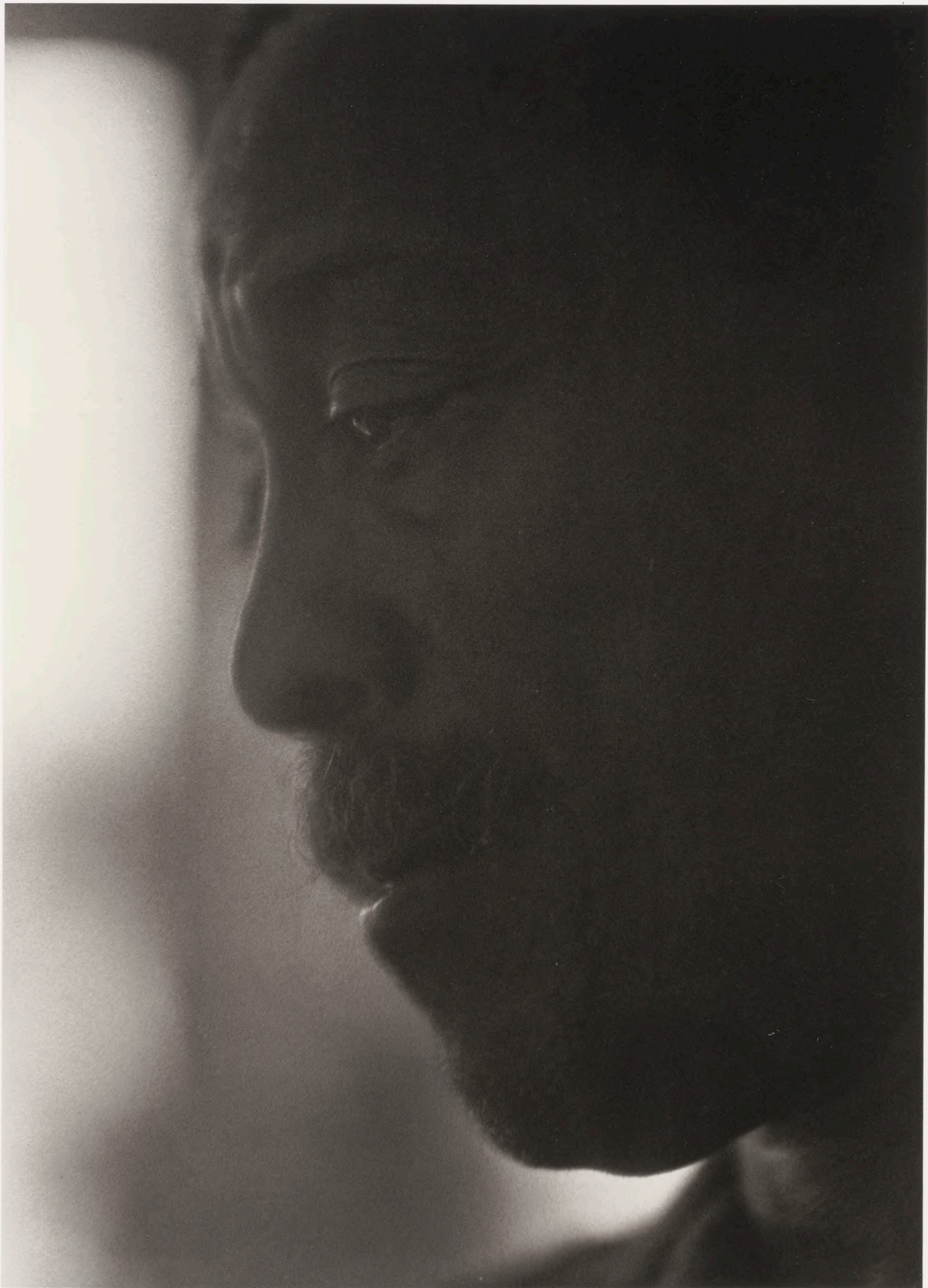
Mary Lou Williams. 1952





Coleman Hawkins. 1956



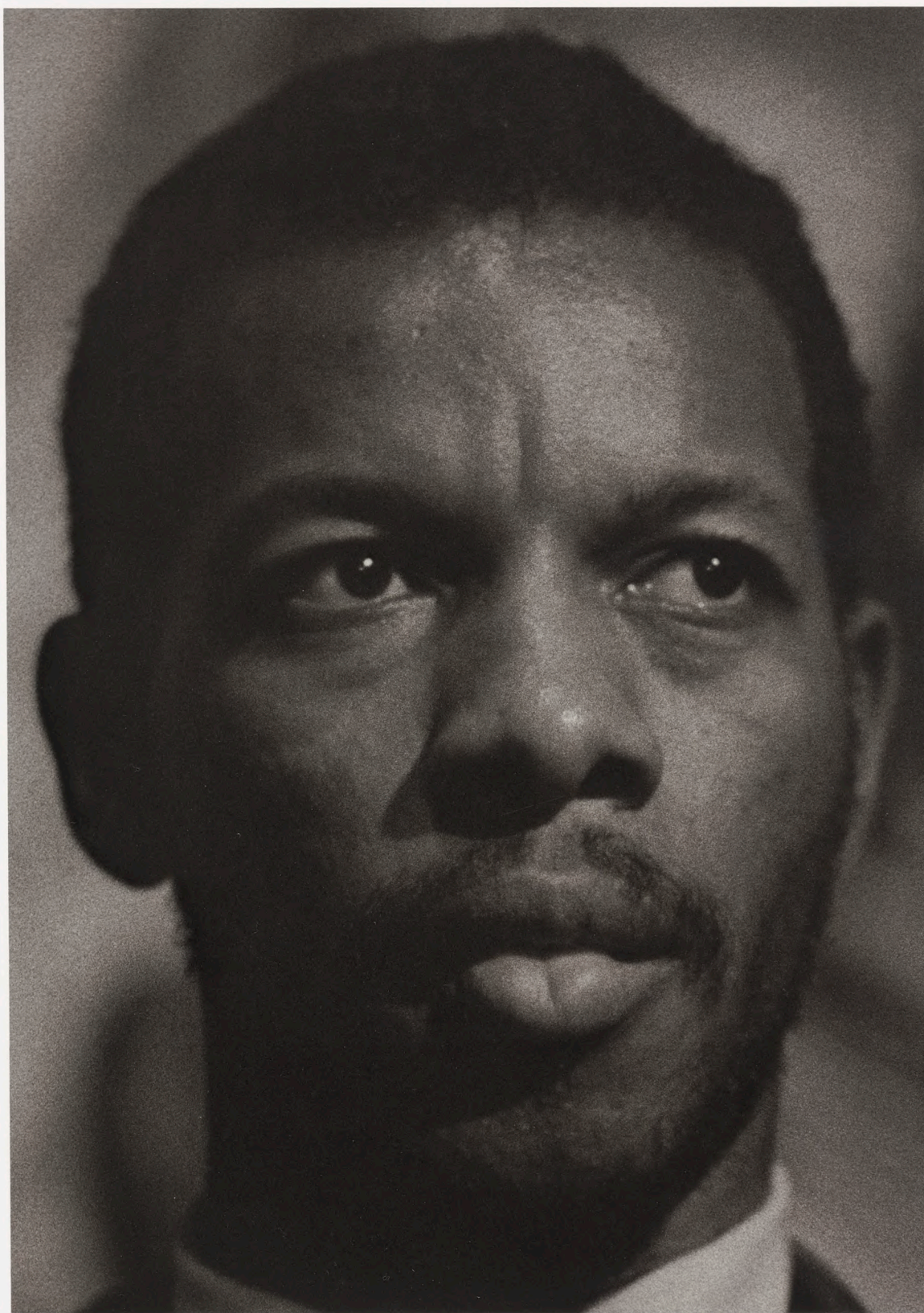


Norman Lewis. 1973





Milt Jackson. 1956





John Coltrane and Ben Webster. 1960



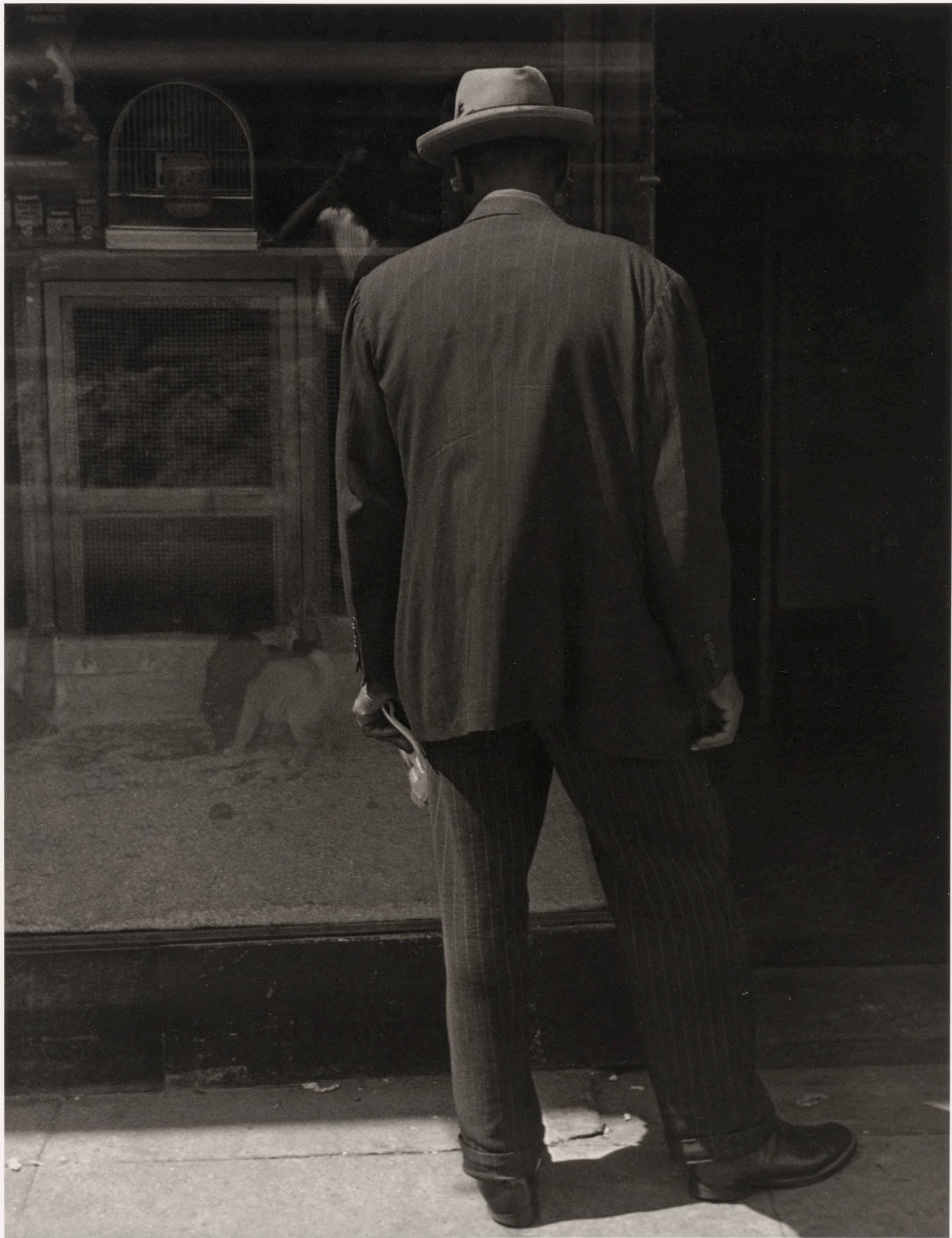






Two men talking, Bankers Trust. 1963



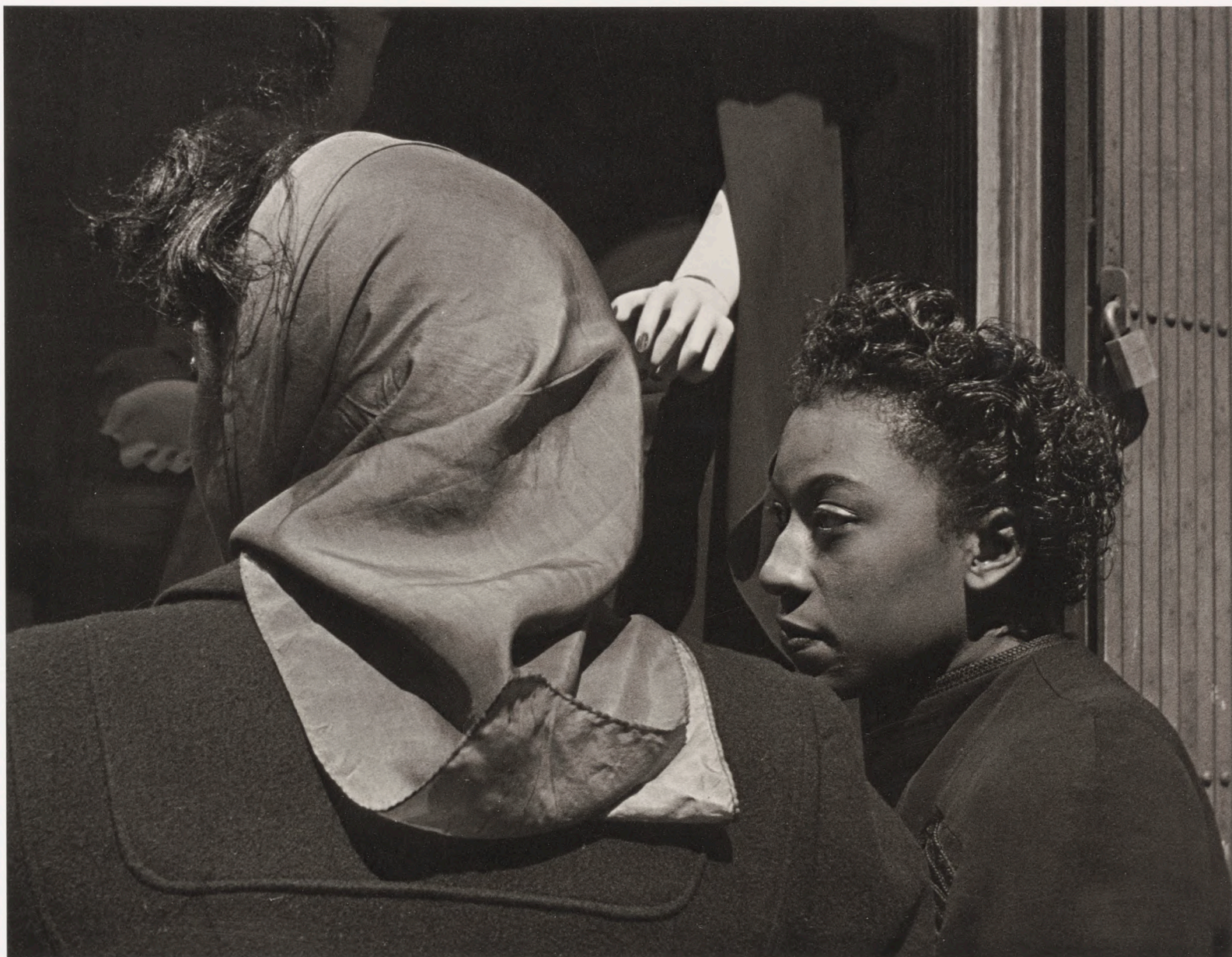


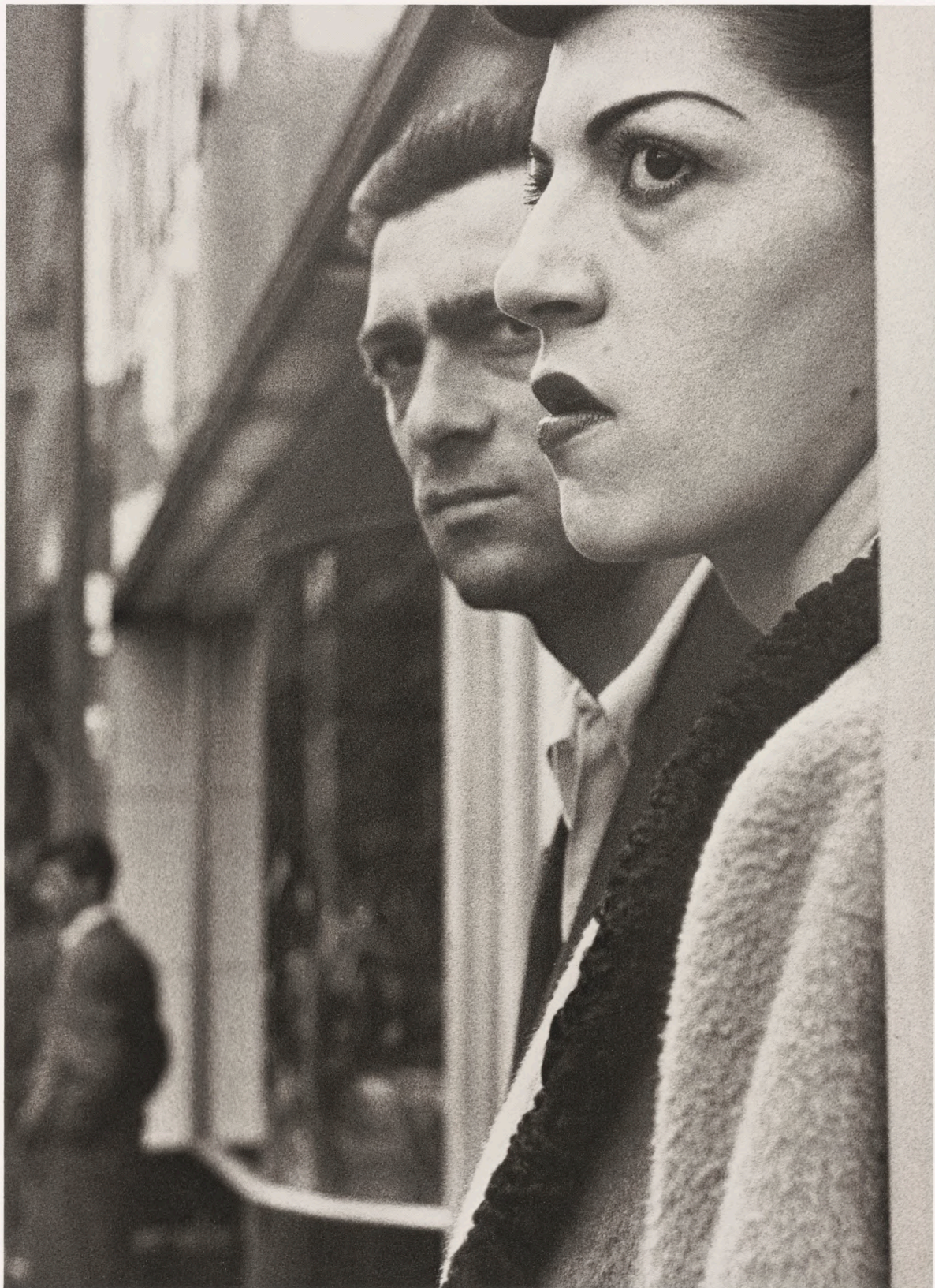
Man looking in pet store window. 1952



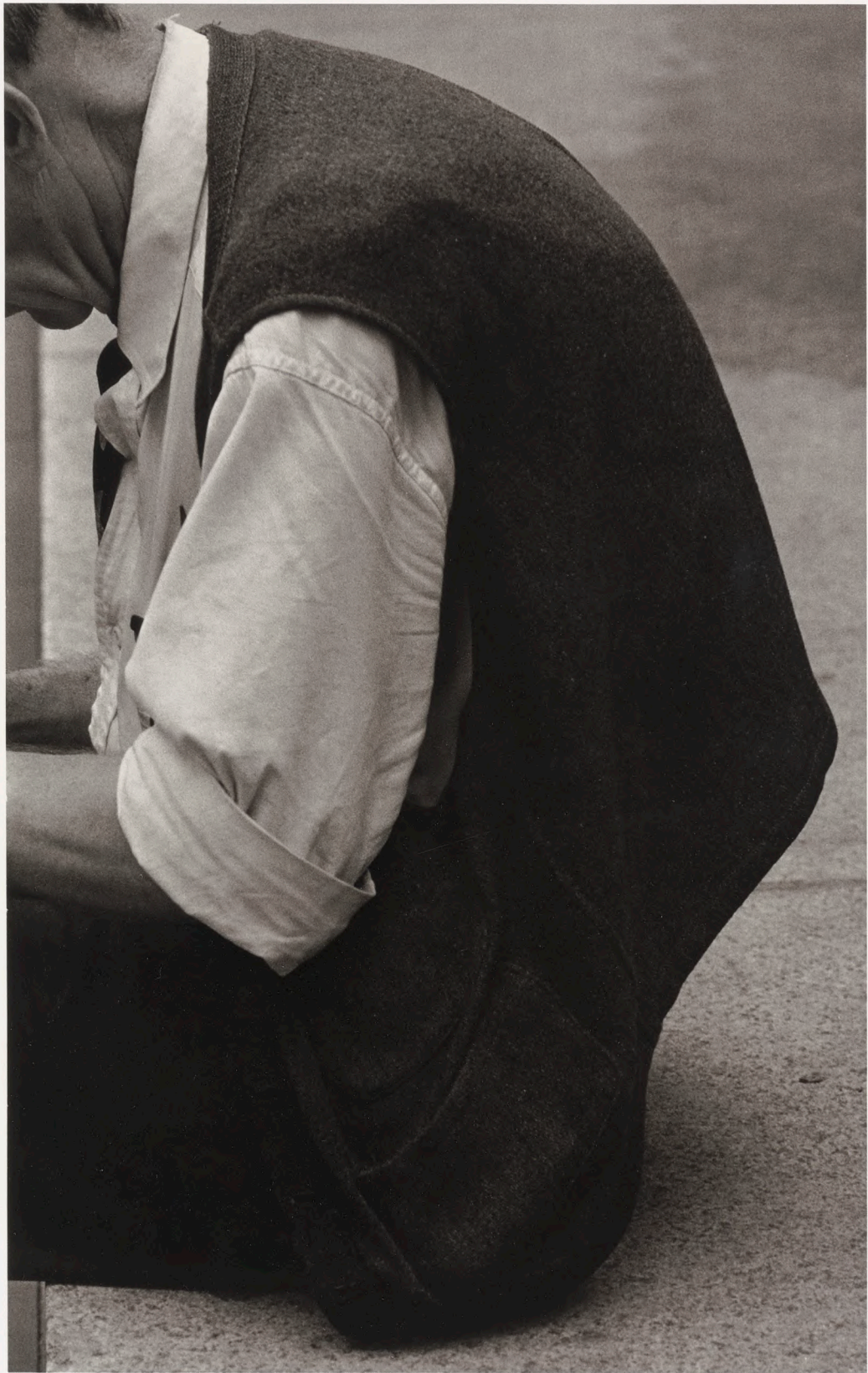


Couple, The Museum of Modern Art. 1950





Couple, Fifth Avenue. 1951





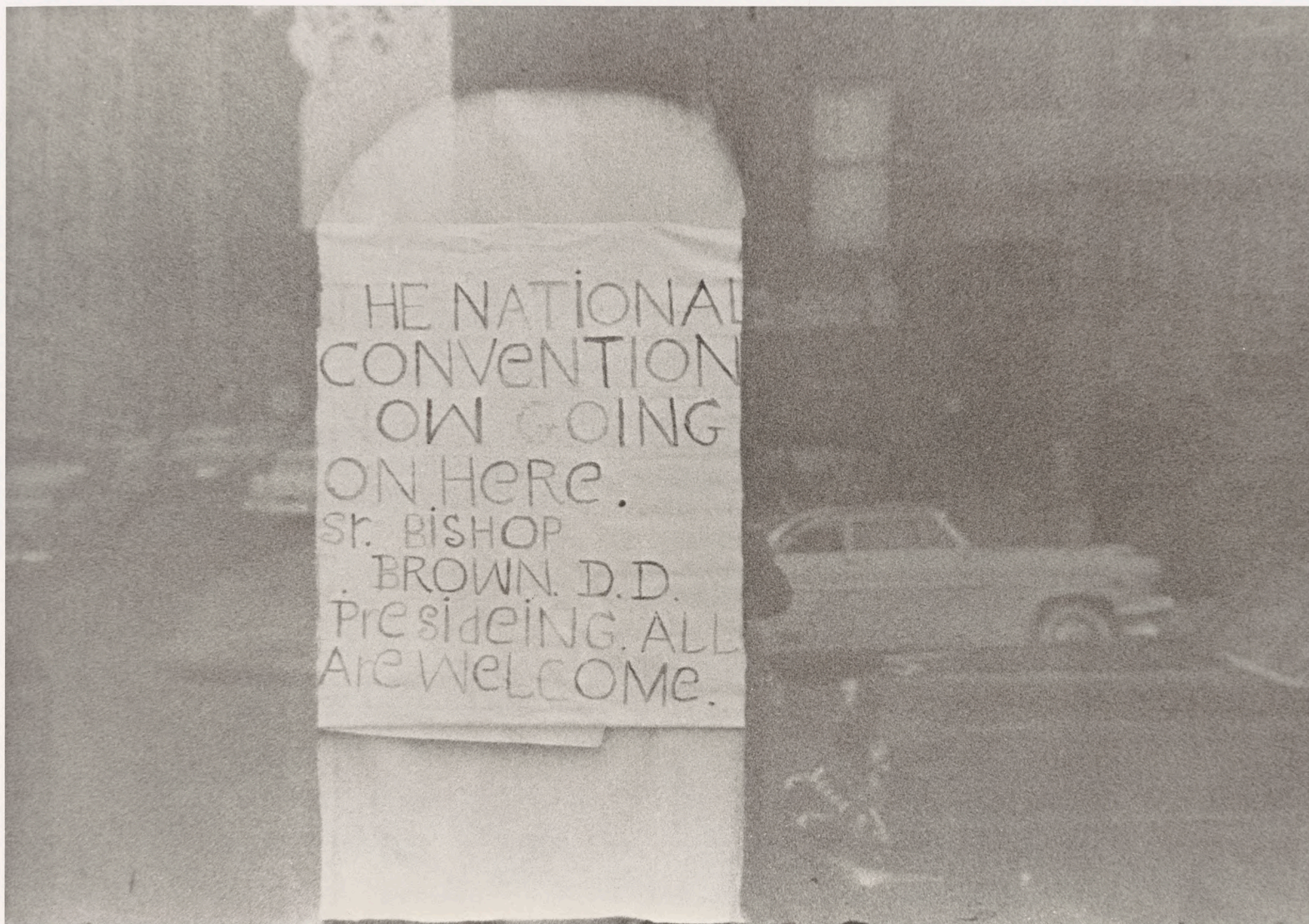
Woman, white scarf. 1961



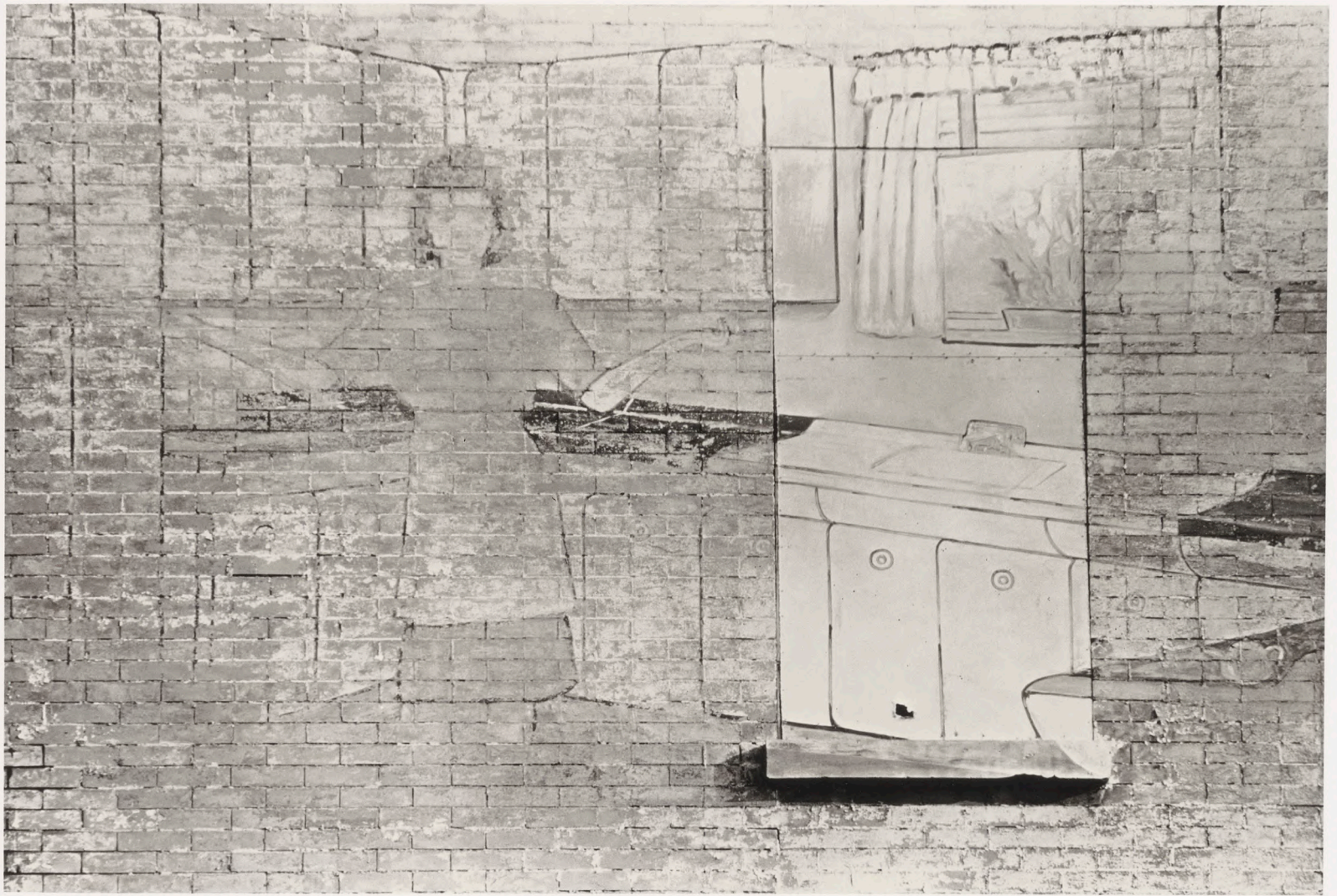


Couple talking, Forty-second Street. 1950

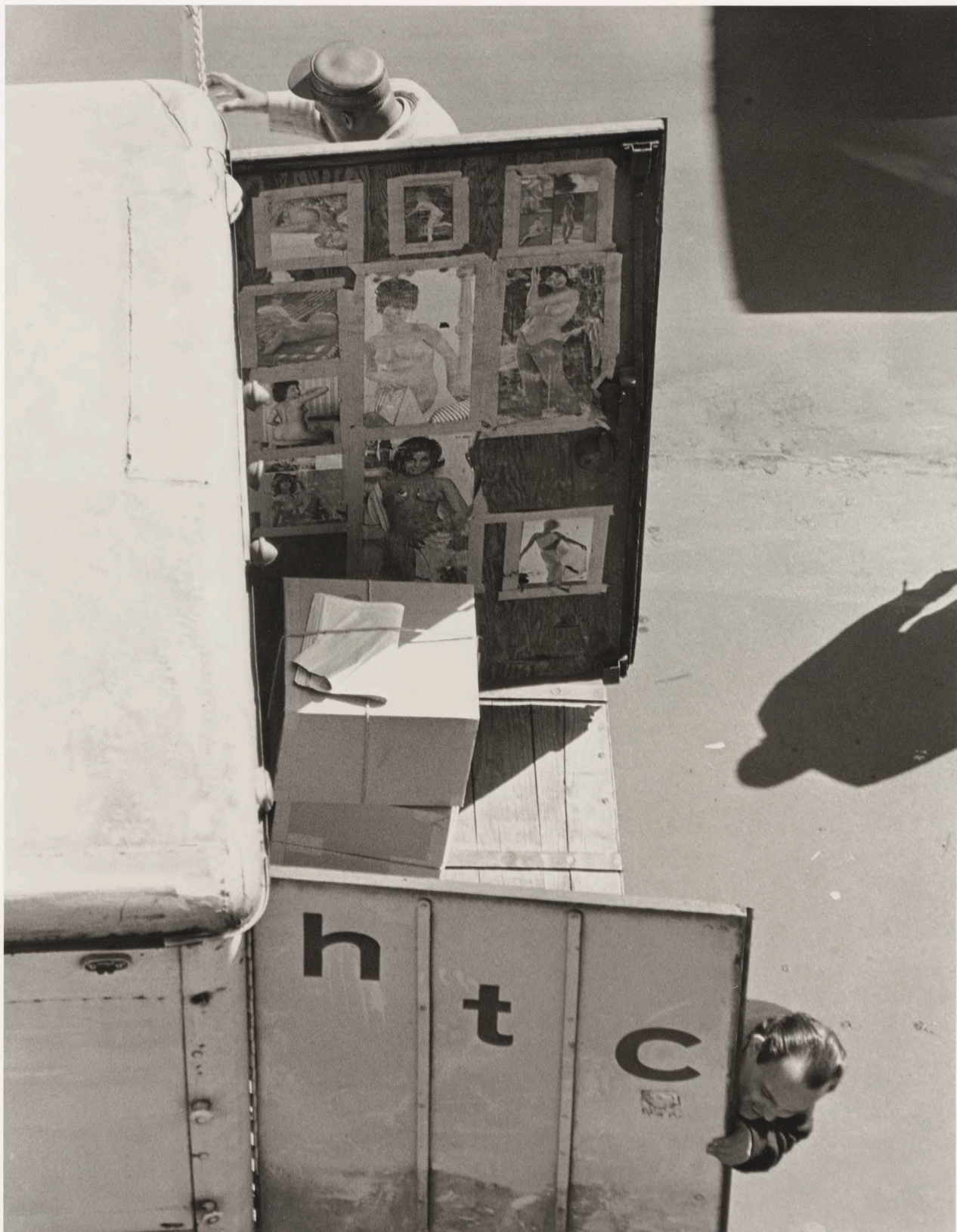












HTC garment truck. 1966





Couple walking, Park Avenue. 1960





Two men, one with hands in pocket. 1963









Back of seated woman in striped dress. 1985





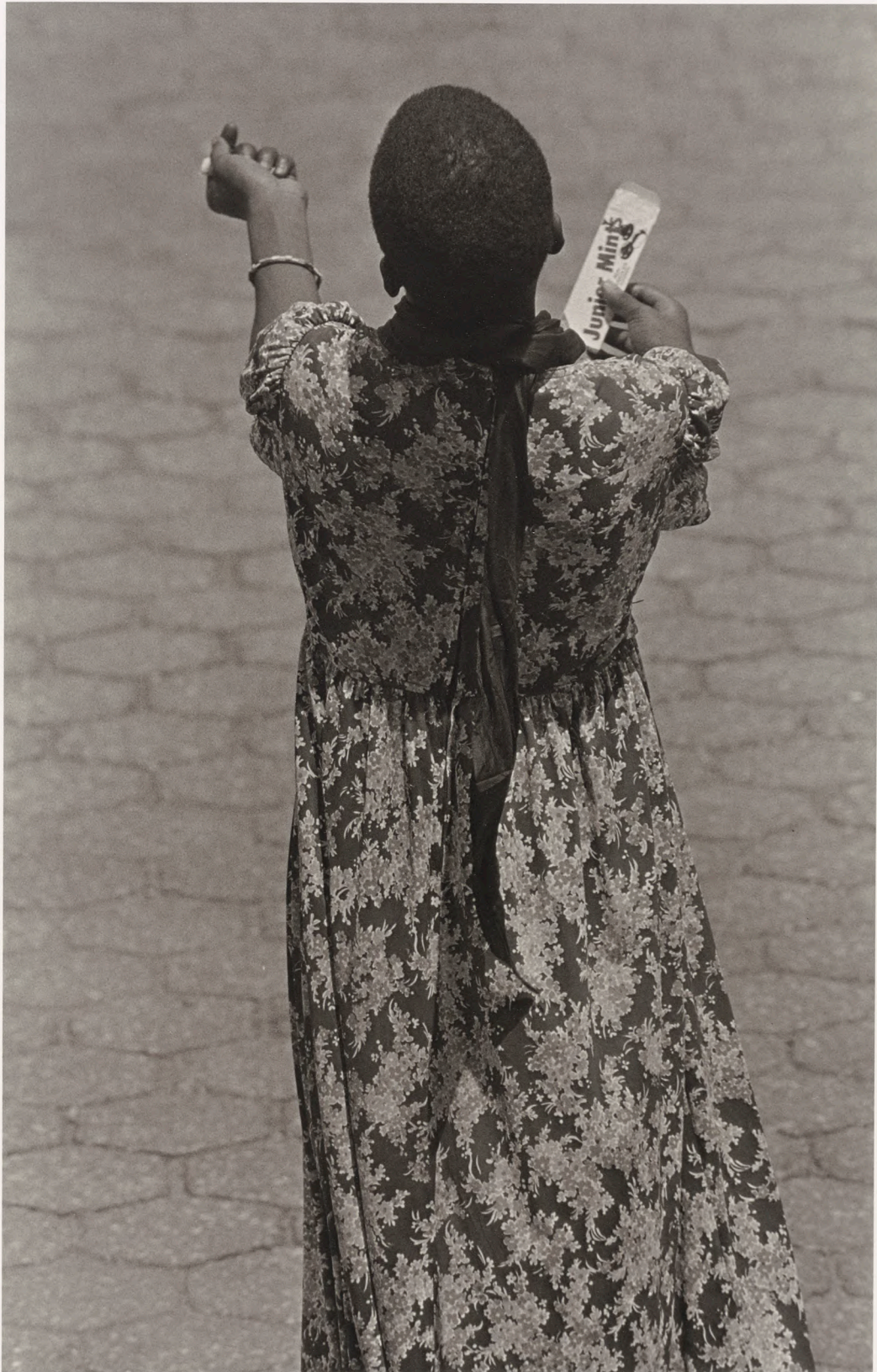
Boy selling balloons. c. 1953





Two men strolling. 1994









Boy, man and graffiti. 1966





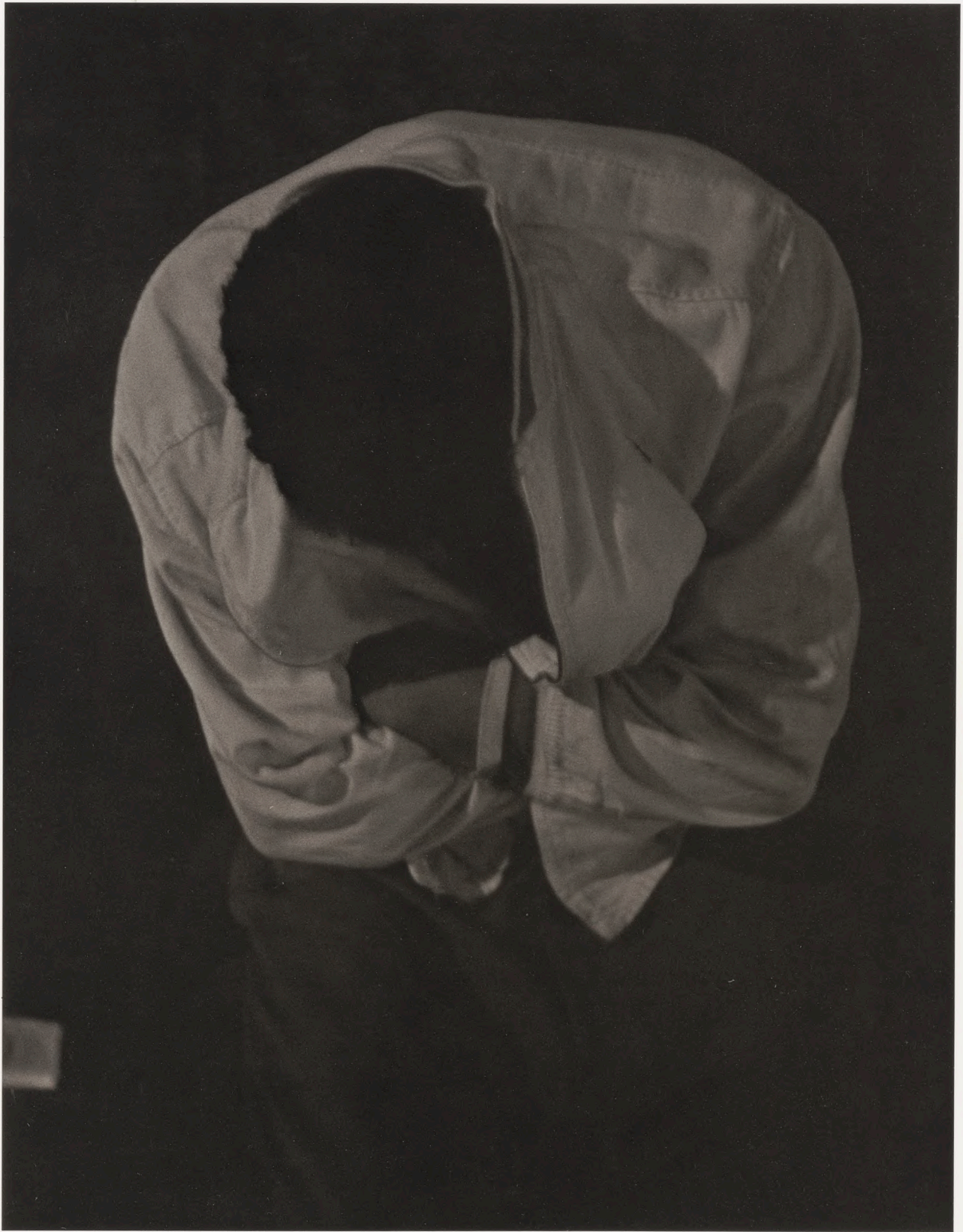
White line. 1960





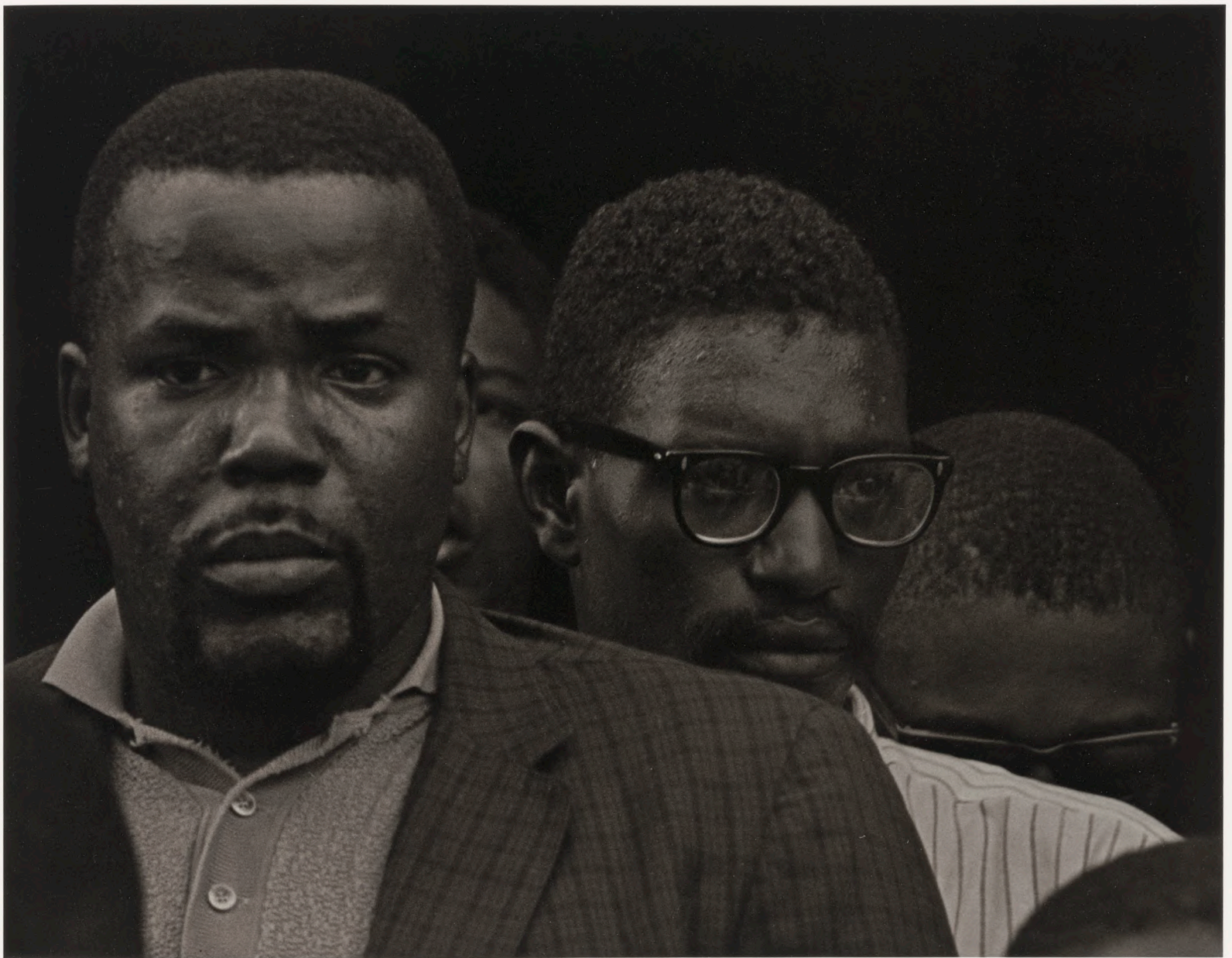
Man sleeping in corrugated carton. 1987





Boy with bowed head. 1961





Five men. 1964

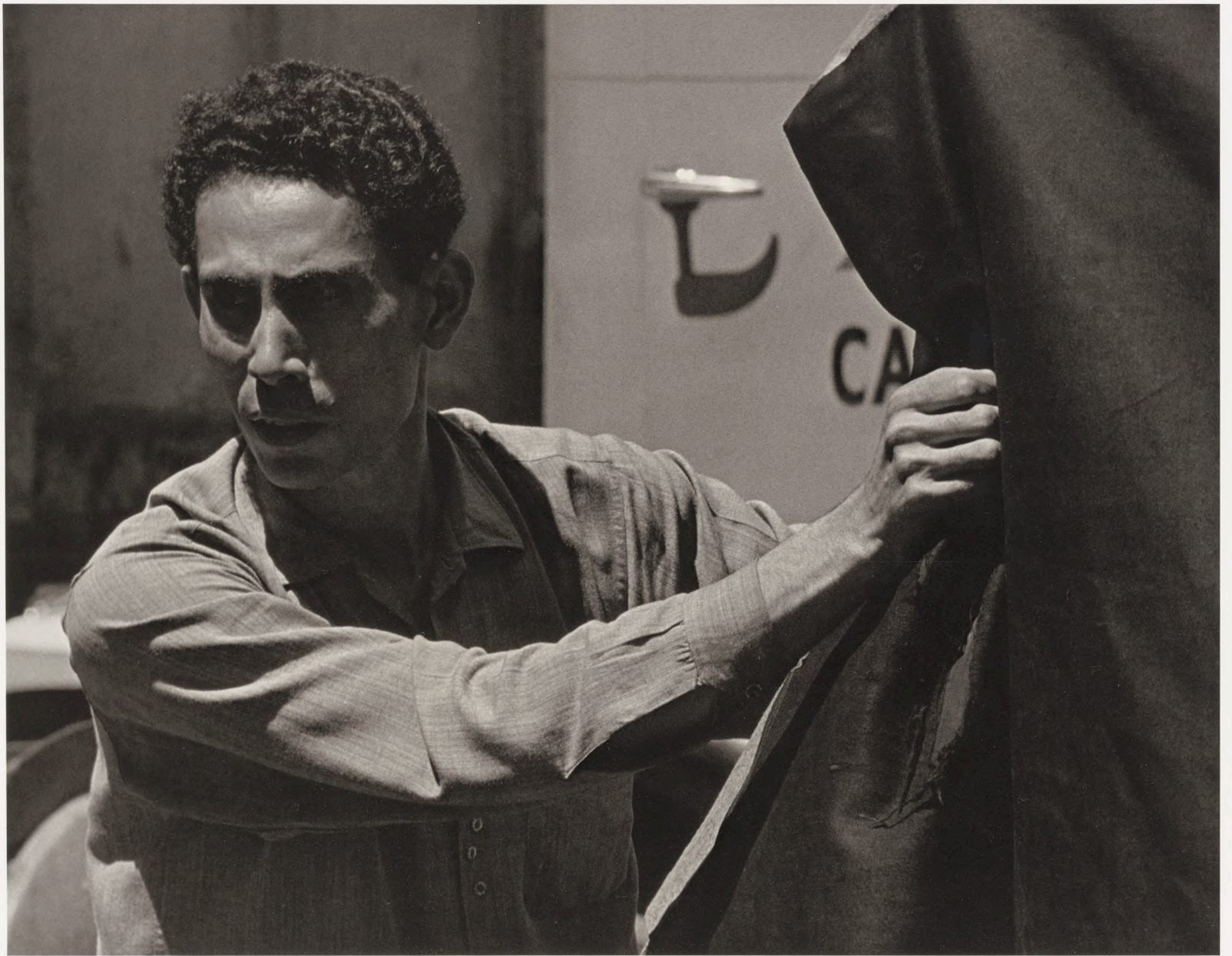




Couple dancing. 1956

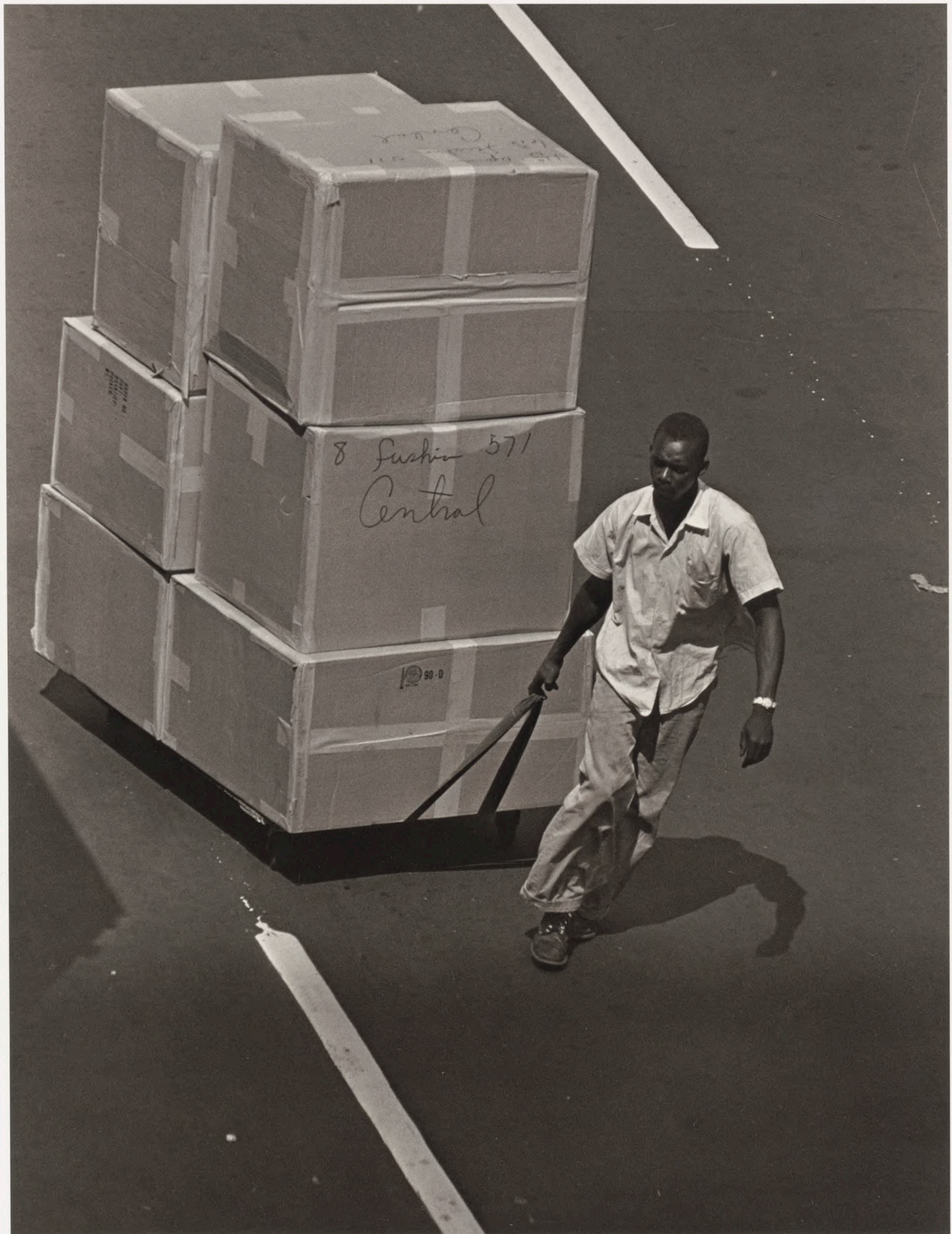








Three men with hand trucks. 1963



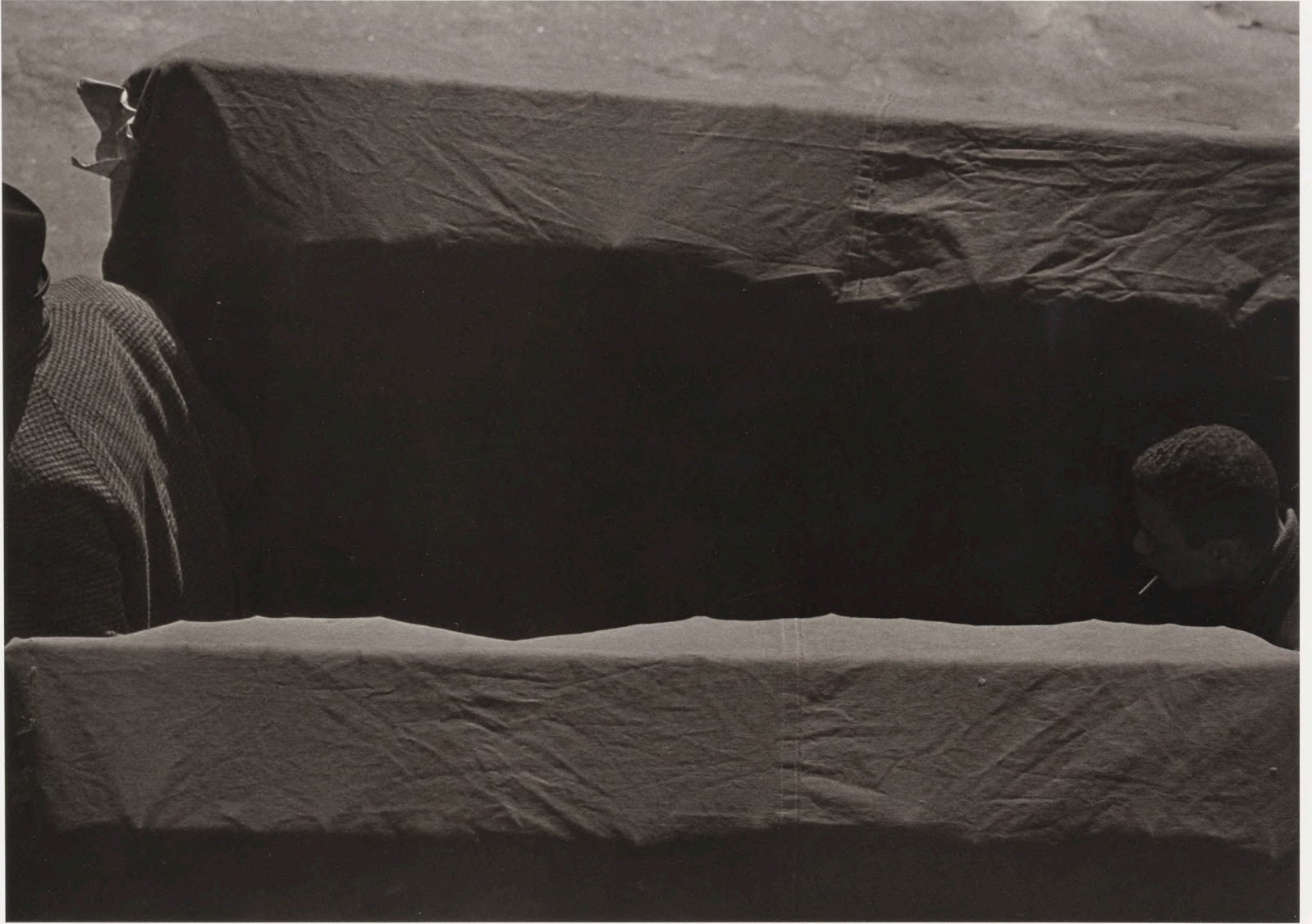


Between cars. 1961





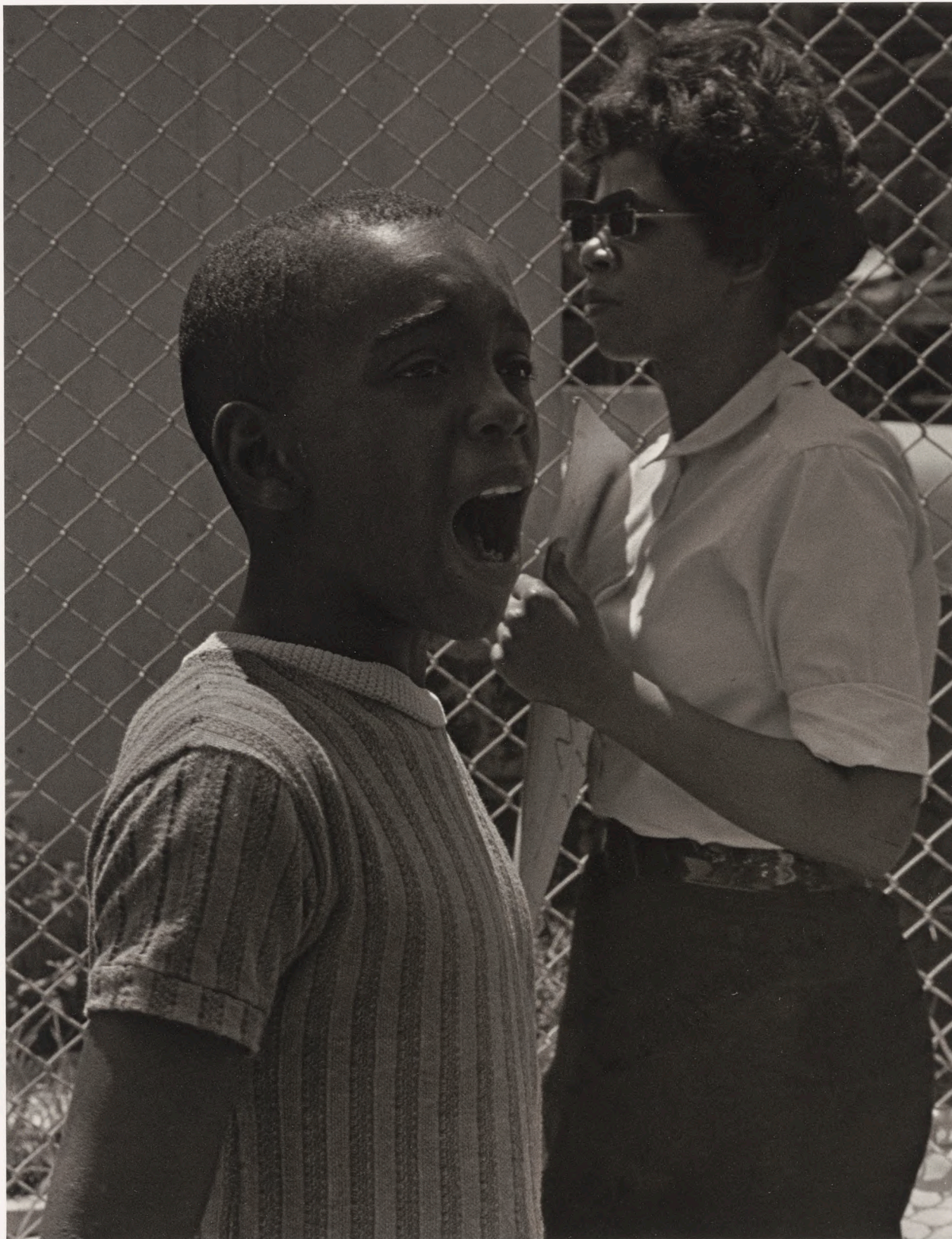
Asphalt workers, Washington, D.C. 1975





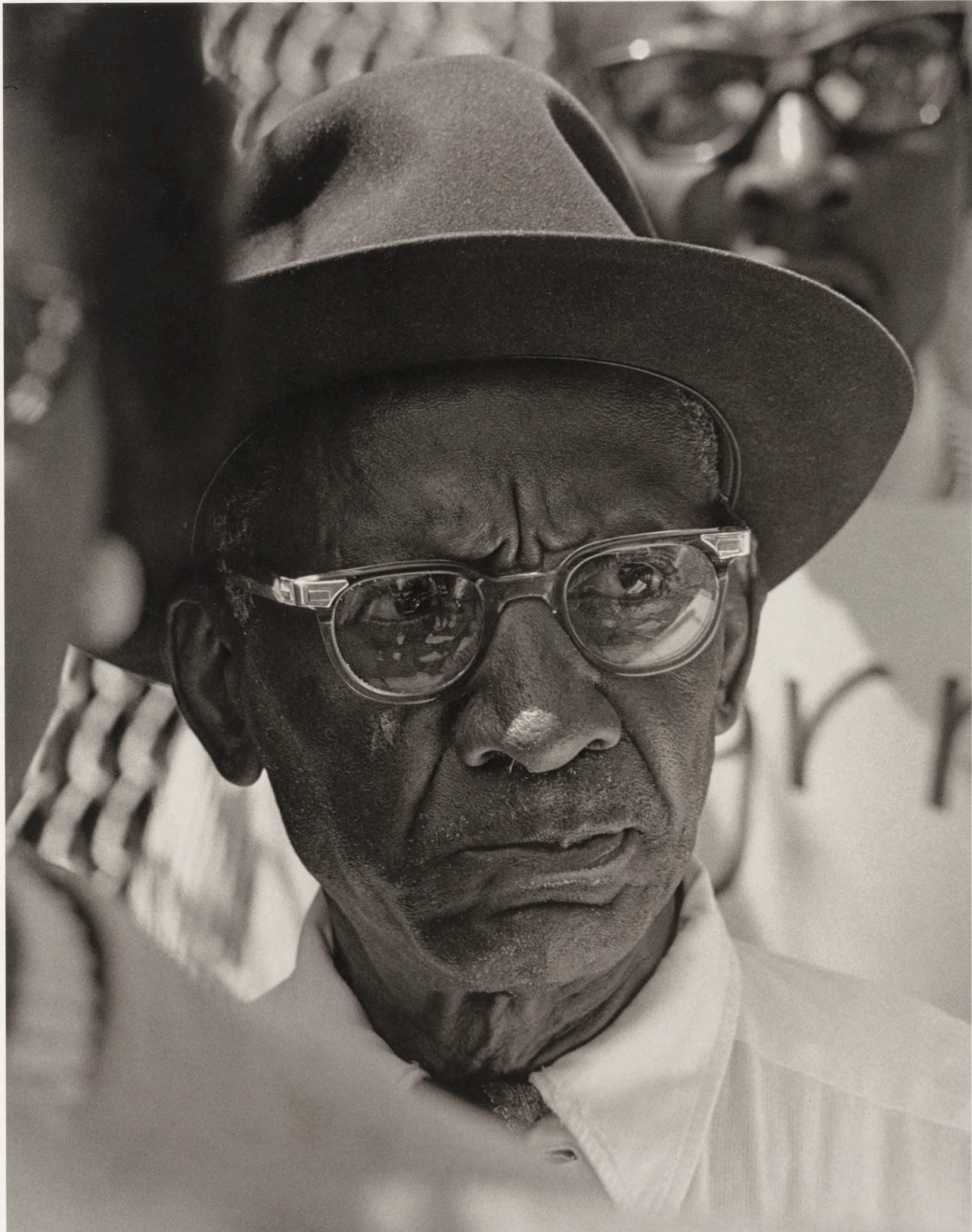
Crane operator. 1987





Boy shouting, Downstate demonstration. 1963





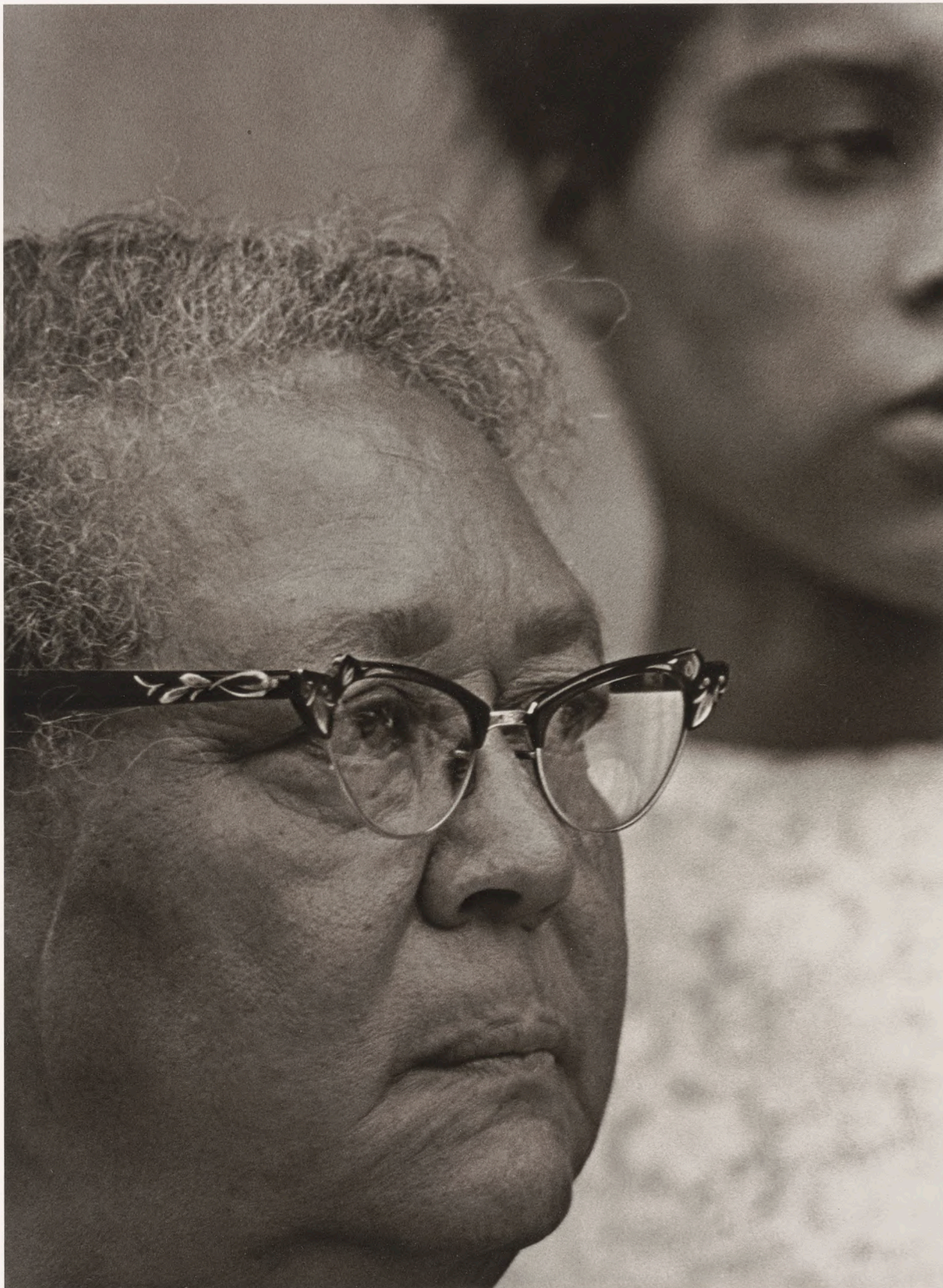
Picket, Downstate demonstration. 1963





Mississippi freedom marcher, Washington, D.C. 1963





Woman and girl. 1964





Louis Armstrong. 1952





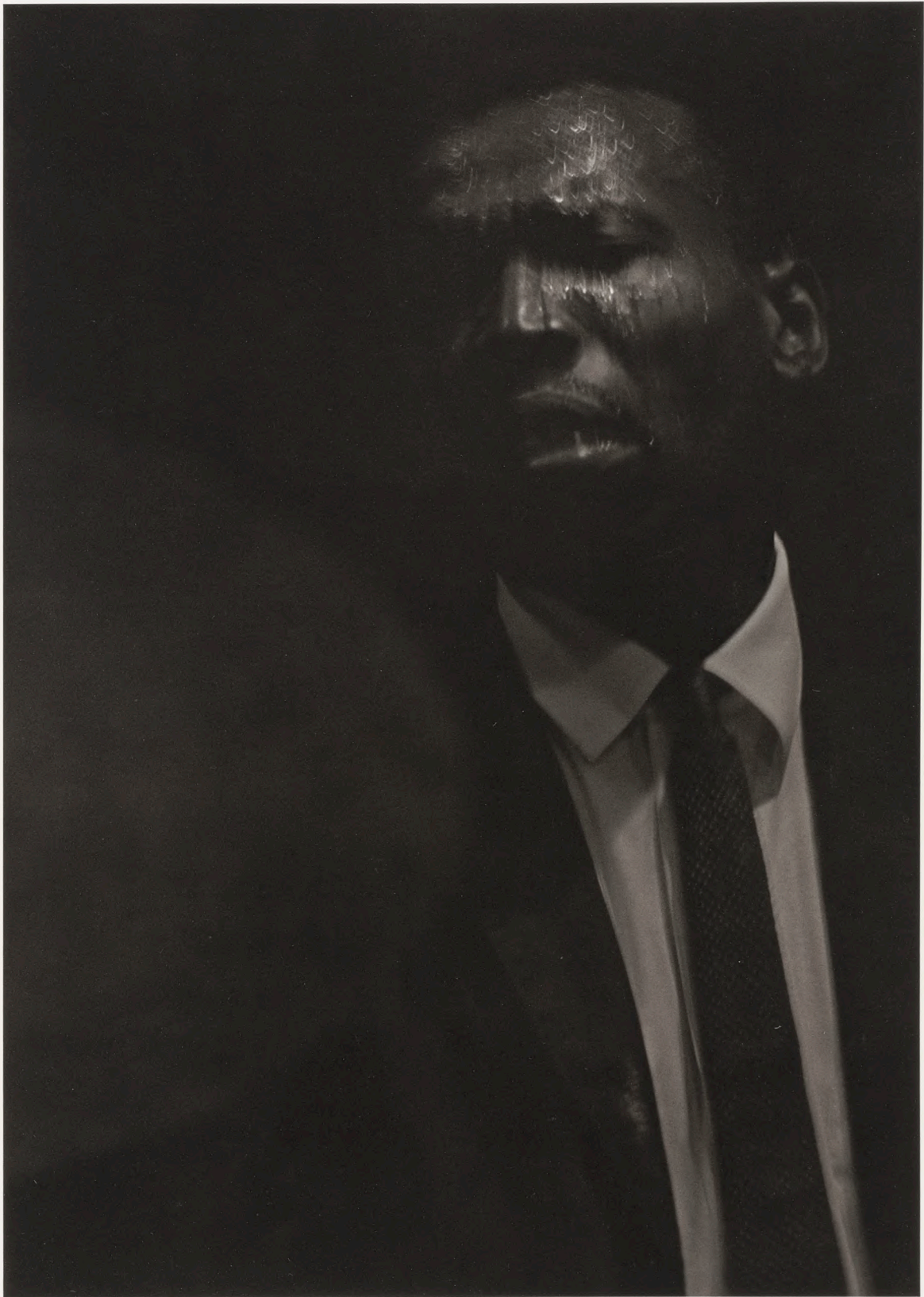
Jam session, Kenny Karpe's. 1956





Miles Davis, Hank Mobley, Washington, D.C. 1963





Elvin Jones. 1961





Mahalia Jackson, singing. 1957





Dancers. 1956





Ellington session break. 1954





Four bassists. 1965





Gloria Lynn. 1960









Coltrane, Half Note. 1960





Art. 1960





Coalman, man walking. 1952





Two coat hangers. 1964



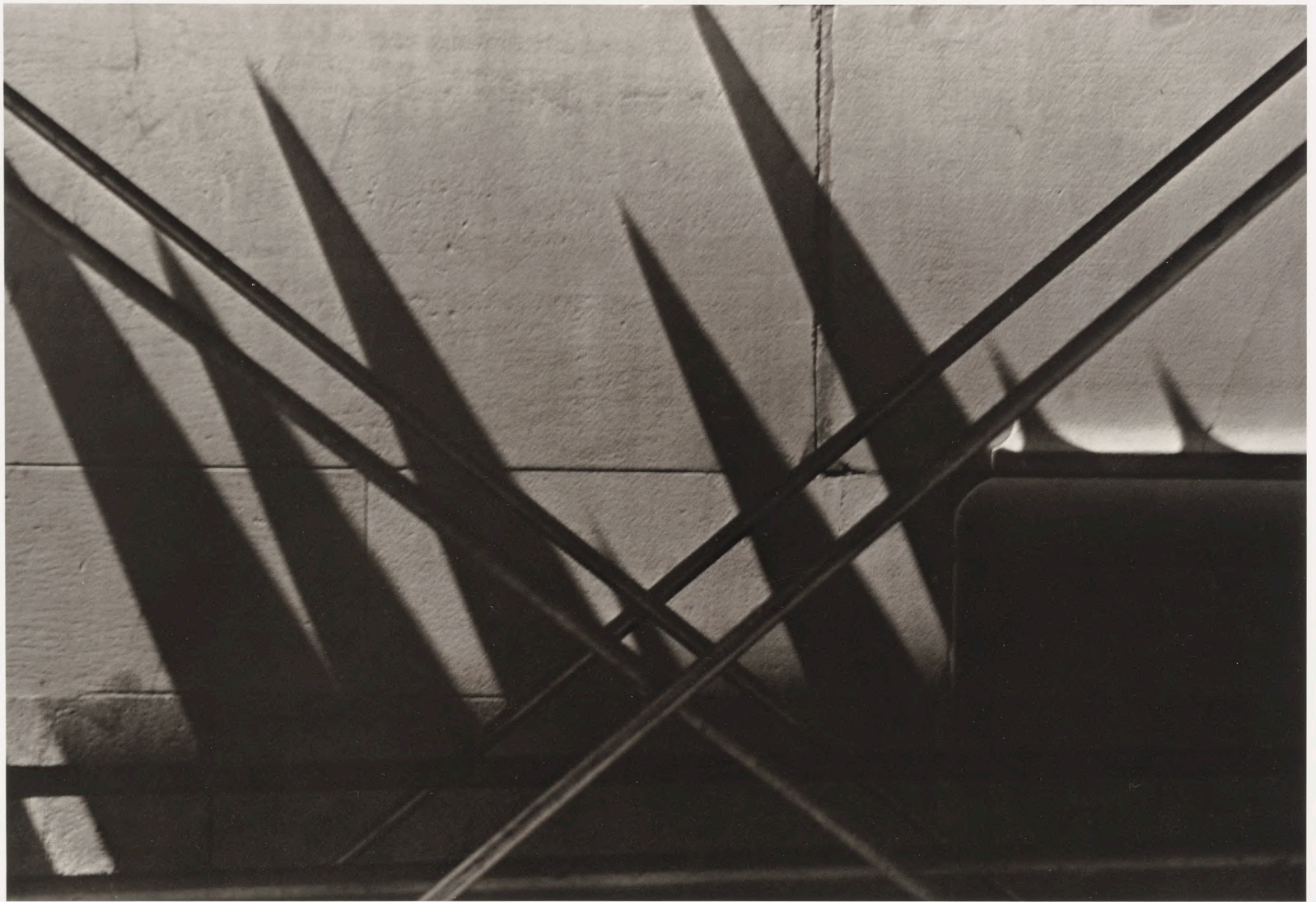


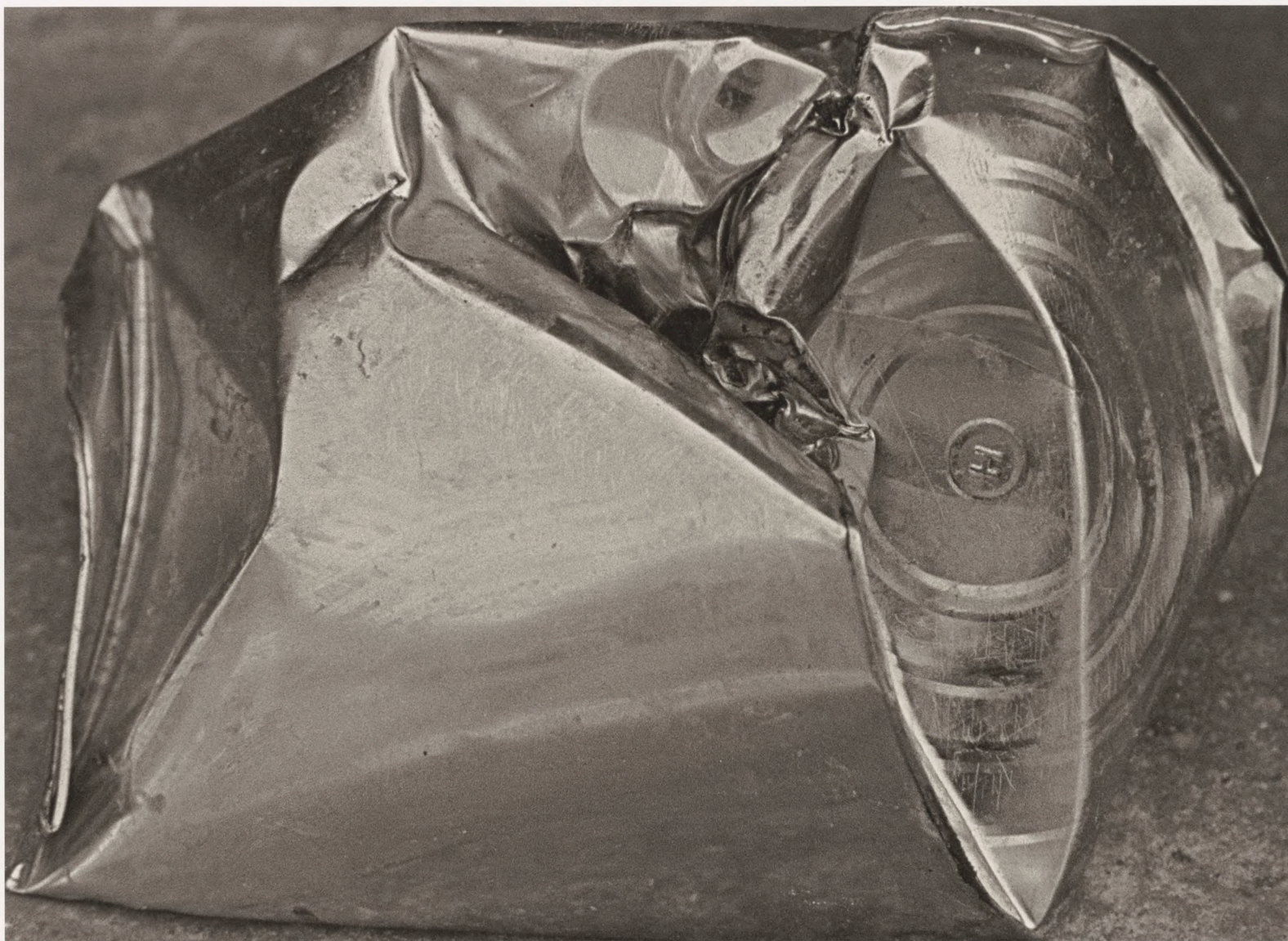
Thirteen steps. 1987



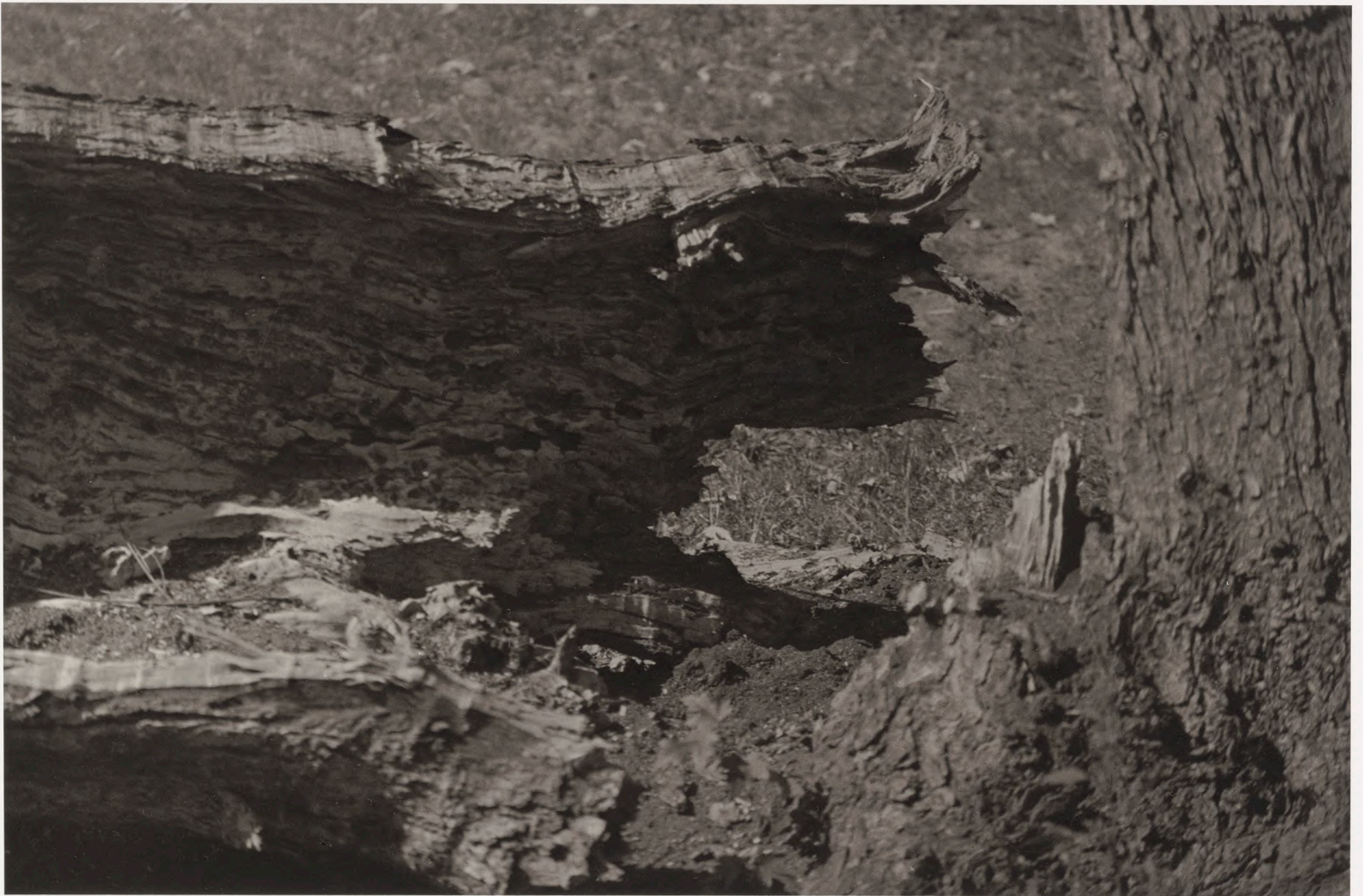


Work glove III. 1991





Crushed can. 1961





Dark water. 1960









Curved branch. 1994









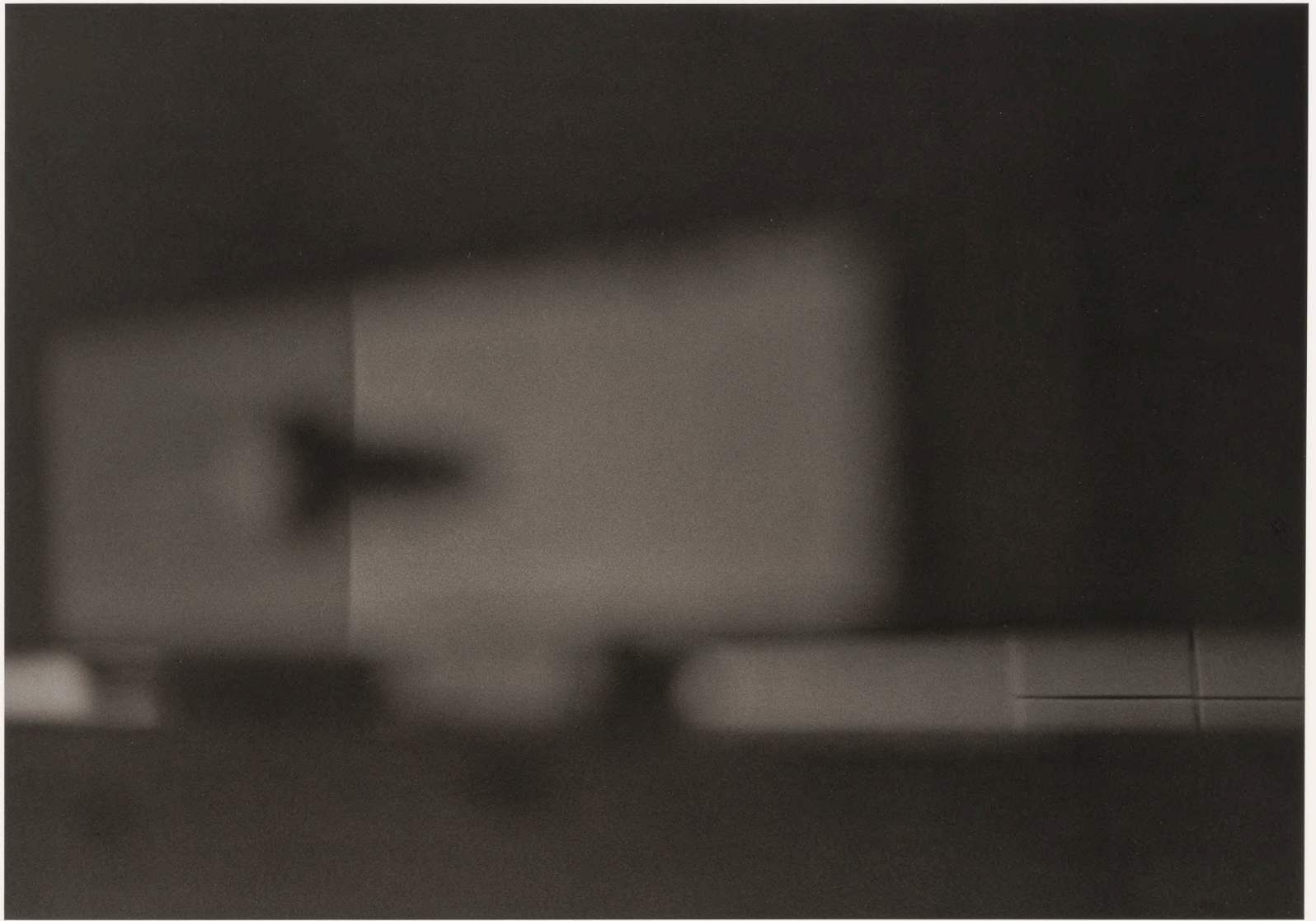
Silver fence. 1983



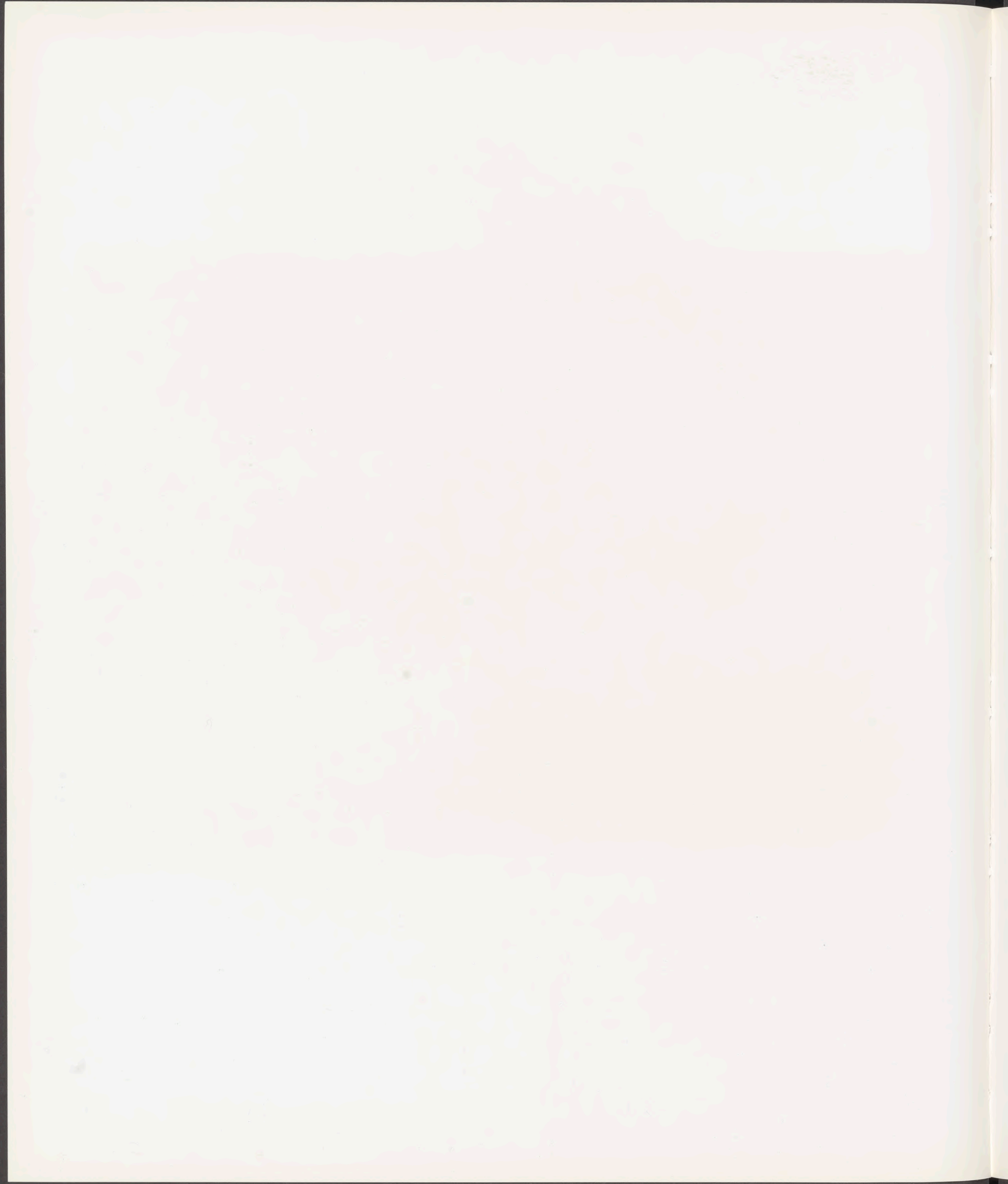


Silver fence. 1983





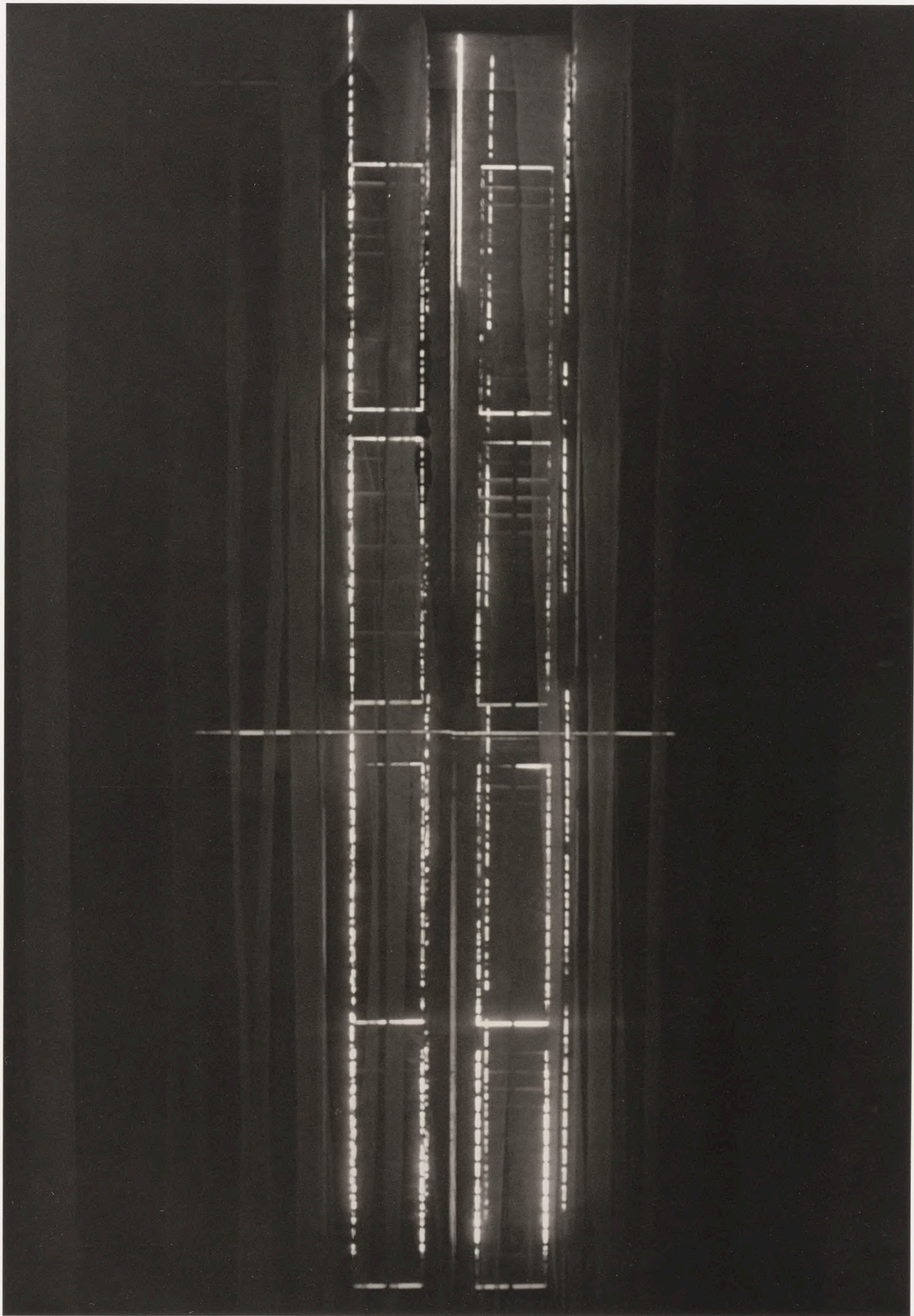
Tile, over a partition. 1961





Self-portrait. 1956





Curtains and light. 1987





Sherry, Susan, Laura, Wendy. 1983





Laura and Wendy. 1987





Self-portrait, tram. 1978













Three figures, Halsey Street. 1987





Two men, one working, one sitting. 1987









Six figures in sunlight. 1985

A NOTE ON THE PRINTS

All of the photographs reproduced in this book are gelatin-silver prints. The prints were made on 11-x-14-inch paper and range in image size from 8 ¹¹/₁₆ x 12 inches (22.1 x 30.5 cm) to 10 ³/₄ x 13 ¹¹/₁₆ inches (27.3 x 34.8 cm), with two exceptions: *Hallway* (1953; page 105), which measures 19 ⁵/₁₆ x 12 ¹¹/₁₆ inches (49.1 x 32.3 cm); and *Man coming up subway stairs* (1952; page 95), which measures 19 x 13 ¹/₄ inches (48.2 x 33.7 cm).

The printing dates of the photographs range from the date of the negative to 1995. All of the prints are in the collection of The DeCarava Archive, with the exception of the following works in the collection of The Museum of Modern Art, New York:

Page 78
Boy, woman's hand on shoulder. 1952
Gift of Walter A. Weiss

Page 95
Man coming up subway stairs. 1952
Gift of the photographer

Page 172
Man with portfolio. 1959
Purchase

Page 209
Mahalia Jackson, singing. 1957
Purchase

A Photographer's Gallery Schedule of Exhibitions

A Photographer's Gallery opened at 48 West Eighty-fourth Street in Manhattan in March 1955. The gallery continued to present exhibitions until May 1957, closing briefly from mid February through March of that year.

The DeCarava clippings file at The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture of The New York Public Library contains two announcements for exhibitions at the gallery and two statements written by Roy DeCarava to explain the purpose of the gallery. (Both statements are quoted in part on page 23 of this volume.) Jacob Deschin, then photography columnist for *The New York Times*, attentively reported the gallery's program. From his columns it is possible to reconstruct its schedule of exhibitions:

ROY DECARAVA

Opened first week in March 1955

The New York Times, March 13, 1955 (Sect. 2, page 14x): "Painstakingly built over a period of several months and on a limited budget, the gallery is actually part of the DeCarava home converted for exhibition purposes. It consists of two rooms separated by screens, the latter as well as the walls and ceilings painted white. . . . If future exhibitors will follow the lead set by Mr. DeCarava in the matter of prices (\$12 for 8x10, \$17 for 11x14, \$25 for 16x20, all including mounting), which are closer to a realistic tag than one usually finds in photographic shows of this calibre, the gallery should at least have a fair chance of making ends meet. Even at these prices, it should be expected that, in spite of a growing appreciation of photographs both for display and collecting purposes, one cannot hope for more than a small public of discriminating buyers. . . . The DeCarava gallery can become a real testing ground for what the traffic will bear in the matter of price as well as picture content and quality. This courageous effort deserves support."

GROUP SHOW

June 4 or 5, 1955–August 27, 1955

The New York Times, June 12, 1955 (Sect. 2, page 14x), and June 26, 1955 (Sect. 2, page x17). On June 12, Deschin mentioned the work of Walter P. Bruning and reproduced a photograph by Lou Bernstein but did not identify the other seventeen photographers represented in the exhibition, except to say that they all belonged to the "documentary school."

RAYMOND JACOBS

September 11–October 28, 1955

The New York Times, September 11, 1955 (Sect. 2, page x19), and September 18, 1955 (Sect. 2, page x21)

PHOTOGRAPHS APPROPRIATE FOR CHRISTMAS GIVING

November 6, 1955–January 6, 1956

Ten photographs each by Berenice Abbott, Roy DeCarava, Al Freed, Scott Hyde, Art Kane, Victor Obatz, Dan Weiner, and Minor White

The New York Times, October 30, 1955 (Sect. 2, page x19), and November 20, 1955 (Sect. 2, page x15)

JAY MAISEL

January 15–March 6, 1956

The New York Times, December 4, 1955 (Sect. 2, page 22x), January 15, 1956 (Sect. 2, page 18x), and January 22, 1956 (Sect. 2, page x19)

DAVID VESTAL

Before March 18–May 4, 1956

The New York Times, March 18, 1956 (Sect. 2, page 16x), and April 29, 1956 (Sect. 2, page x21)

MARVIN NEWMAN

Week of May 20–July 1, 1956

The New York Times, May 27, 1956 (Sect. 2, page x17)

NEW TALENT

July 8–August 18, 1956

Works by Raimondo Borea, Gabriel Flaum, Ross Lowell, Ted Tessler, Gladys Rice Washburn, Tony Casellas, Don Hunstein, Lou Parascandolo, Ann Treer, and Tad Yamashiro

The New York Times, July 8, 1956 (Sect. 2, page 14x), and July 15, 1956 (Sect. 2, page x13). In the first article Deschin wrote, "An annual series of exhibitions designed to encourage new young talent in photography will be inaugurated this afternoon. . . . Photographers who would like to submit their work for consideration for next year's show are invited to contact the gallery director early in the year."

RUTH BERNHARD

September 16–October 31, 1956

The New York Times, September 16, 1956 (Sect. 2, page 20x), and October 21, 1956 (Sect. 2, page x21)

FIVE PHOTOGRAPHERS: *Harry Callahan, Roy DeCarava, Scott Hyde, Leon Levinstein, and Victor Ob-
satz*

November 11–December 21, 1956

The New York Times, November 11, 1956 (Sect. 2, page x17)

[RALPH] EUGENE MEATYARD AND VAN
DEREN COKE

December 30, 1956–February 17, 1957

The New York Times, December 30, 1956 (Sect. 2, page 16x)

HARRY CALLAHAN

March 31–May 1957

The New York Times, February 17, 1957 (Sect. 2, page x21), and April 14, 1957 (Sect. 2, page x17). In the second article Deschin wrote, "Harry Callahan's one-man exhibition . . . is probably the first comprehensive display of his over-all achievement in this city."

Exhibition History

COMPILED BY SARAH HERMANSON

The following list of exhibitions is in chronological order by opening date. When an exhibition was accompanied by a publication, it is indicated by the word *catalogue*.

INDIVIDUAL EXHIBITIONS

- New York, Serigraph Galleries. *Roy DeCarava*, November 10–29, 1947
- New York, Forty-Fourth Street Gallery. 1950
- New York, Countee Cullen Branch, The New York Public Library. 1951
- New York, The Little Gallery, Hudson Park Branch, The New York Public Library. *People of Harlem*, May 4–31, 1954
- New York, A Photographer's Gallery. *Roy DeCarava*, March 1955
- New York, Camera Club of New York. 1956
- New York, 115th Street Branch, The New York Public Library. April 1956
- New York, Countee Cullen Branch, The New York Public Library. *Us*, March 3–31, 1965
- New York, The Studio Museum in Harlem. *Thru Black Eyes: Photographs by Roy DeCarava*, September 14–October 26, 1969
- Lincoln, Nebraska, Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska. *Roy DeCarava, Photographer*, April 28–May 24, 1970. Catalogue
- Boston, Park Square Campus, University of Massachusetts. *Photographic Perspectives: Roy DeCarava*, October 18–November 6, 1974
- Houston, The Museum of Fine Arts. *Roy DeCarava: Photographs*, September 12–October 26, 1975. Catalogue
- Washington, D.C., Corcoran Gallery of Art. *The Nation's Capital in Photographs, 1976: Roy DeCarava*, February 14–May 9, 1976. Catalogue
- New York, The Witkin Gallery. *Roy DeCarava*, January 12–February 12, 1977
- Port Washington, New York, Port Washington Public Library. *Roy DeCarava: Photographs*, February 4–28, 1978
- Carmel, California, The Friends of Photography, Sunset Center. *Photographs by Roy DeCarava*, January 11–February 10, 1980. Catalogue
- Akron, Ohio, Akron Art Institute. *Roy DeCarava: Photographs*, January 12–March 2, 1980
- Los Angeles Center for Photographic Studies. *Roy DeCarava*, April 5–May 15, 1982
- New York, The Witkin Gallery. *Roy DeCarava: Photographs 1948–1980*, April 28–June 5, 1982
- Cambridge, Massachusetts, Clarence Kennedy Gallery. *Roy DeCarava*, September 10–October 15, 1982. Organized in conjunction with the Photographic Resource Center, Boston
- New York, The Studio Museum in Harlem. *The Sound I Saw: The Jazz Photographs of Roy DeCarava*, January 19–March 20, 1983. Exhibition traveled to: Hunter College Art Gallery, New York, February 15–March 16, 1984; Port Washington Public Library, Port Washington, New York, July 9–August 29, 1984; and Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York, April 27–June 16, 1985. Catalogue
- Middletown, Connecticut, Zilkha Gallery, Wesleyan University. *The Photography of Roy DeCarava*, October 23–December 8, 1985
- San Diego, Museum of Photographic Arts. *Roy DeCarava: Between Time*, December 2, 1986–February 8, 1987
- Brooklyn, New York, First Print Gallery. *In Praise of Children by Roy DeCarava*, December 14–18, 1986
- Chicago, Edwynn Houk Gallery. *Roy DeCarava: Photographs*, April 3–May 2, 1987
- London, The Photographer's Gallery. *Roy DeCarava*, January 29–February 27, 1988
- Stockholm, Fotografiska Museet in Moderna Museet. *Fotografier av Årstider Roy DeCarava*, September 24–November 27, 1988. Catalogue

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New York, The Witkin Gallery. *Roy DeCarava: Recent Photographs*, February 27–April 7, 1990

Rochester, New York, Light Impressions Spectrum Gallery. *Roy DeCarava: Photogravures*, September 7–October 28, 1990

Madison, New Jersey, Drew University Photography Gallery. *Roy DeCarava: Recent Photographs*, February 5–26, 1991

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- New York, The Museum of Modern Art. *Always the Young Strangers*, February 26–April 1, 1953
- New York, Caravan Gallery. *Through the Lens*, 1953
- New York, The Museum of Modern Art. *The Family of Man*, January 26–May 8, 1955. Exhibition shown at eighty-eight venues in thirty-seven countries in North and South America, Europe, Asia, Africa, and Australia between 1955 and 1965. Catalogue
- Paris, Musée d'Art Moderne. *50 Ans d'Art aux Etats-Unis*, March 30–May 15, 1955. Organized by The Museum of Modern Art, New York. As *Modern Art in the United States: Selections from the Collections of The Museum of Modern Art, New York*, the exhibition traveled to: Kunsthaus, Zurich, July 16–August 28, 1955; Palacio de la Vireina, Barcelona, September 24–October 24, 1955; Haus des Deutschen Kunsthandwerk, Frankfurt, November 13–December 11, 1955; Tate Gallery, London, January 5–February 12, 1956; Gemeente Museum, The Hague, March 20–April 15, 1956; Sezession Galerie, Vienna, May 5–June 2, 1956; Kalemegdan Pavilion, Belgrade, July 6–August 6, 1956.
- New York, A Photographer's Gallery. *Photographs Appropriate for Christmas Giving*, November 6, 1955–January 6, 1956
- New York, A Photographer's Gallery. *Five Photographers: Harry Callahan, Roy DeCarava, Scott Hyde, Leon Levinstein, and Victor Ohsatz*, November 11–December 21, 1956
- New York, The Museum of Modern Art. *Seventy Photographers Look at New York*, November 27, 1957–February 2, 1958
- New York, The Museum of Modern Art. *Photographs from the Museum Collection*, November 26, 1958–January 18, 1959
- New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. *Photography in the Fine Arts*, May 8–September 7, 1959
- New York, The Museum of Modern Art. *Toward the "New" Museum: A Bid for Space*, November 16–29, 1959
- New York, The Museum of Modern Art. *Recent Acquisitions: Photography*, December 21, 1960–February 12, 1961
- New York, The Museum of Modern Art. *Toward the "New" Museum: A Bid for Space III*, April 3, 1962–February 13, 1963
- New York, The Museum of Modern Art. *Toward the "New" Museum: A Bid for Space IV*, February 21–June 25, 1963
- New York, Kamoinge Workshop Gallery. *Photographs by the Kamoinge Workshop*, March 15–April 19, 1964
- New York, The Museum of Modern Art. *The Photographer's Eye*, May 27–August 23, 1964. Catalogue
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- Philadelphia College of Art. *An Exhibition of Work by the John Simon Guggenheim Fellows in Photography*, April 15–May 13, 1966. Catalogue
- Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada. *Photography in the Twentieth Century*, February 17–April 2, 1967. Organized by The George Eastman House, Rochester, New York. Exhibition traveled in Canada through February 18, 1968. Catalogue
- New York, Whitney Museum of American Art. *Photography in America*, November 20, 1974–January 12, 1975. Catalogue
- New Haven, Connecticut, Yale School of Art, Art and Architecture Gallery. *New York: The City and Its People*, January 10–28, 1977
- Washington, D.C., Corcoran Gallery of Art. *Black Photographers in America*, July 30–August 31, 1977
- Sacramento, California. E. B. Crocker Art Gallery. *Forty American Photographers*, February 4–March 5, 1978. Catalogue
- New York, Langston Hughes Community Library and Cultural Center. *Contemporary American Masters: Romare Bearden, Ernest Crichlow and Roy DeCarava*, April 1978
- New York, The Museum of Modern Art. *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography since 1960*, July 28–October 2, 1978. Exhibition traveled to: The

- Cleveland Museum of Art, November 13, 1978–January 1, 1979; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, January 29–March 11, 1979; J. B. Speed Art Museum, Louisville, Kentucky, April 1–May 15, 1979; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, June 7–July 29, 1979; Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois, Champaign, August 19–September 23, 1979; Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, November 12–December 23, 1979; Milwaukee Art Center, January 10–March 2, 1980. Catalogue
- Washington, D.C., Corcoran Gallery of Art. *American Images: New Work by Twenty Contemporary Photographers*, October 13–December 12, 1979. Exhibition traveled to: International Center of Photography, New York, January 3–February 10, 1980; The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, March 14–May 18, 1980; Minneapolis Institute of Arts, July 17–September 14, 1980; Indianapolis Museum of Art, October 16–November 30, 1980; Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, January 4–February 3, 1981; School of Communications, University of Texas, Austin, March 10–April 15, 1981. Catalogue
- New York, International Center of Photography, *Photography of the Fifties: An American Perspective*, May 23–July 6, 1980. Organized by the Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson. Exhibition traveled to: Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, September 28–November 13, 1980; Minneapolis Institute of Arts, December 14, 1980–February 28, 1981; The Art Galleries, California State University, Long Beach, March 30–May 3, 1981; Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington, August 7–September 13, 1981. Catalogue
- New York, The Museum of Modern Art. *American Children*, January 8–March 29, 1981. Catalogue
- Woodstock, New York, Center for Photography at Woodstock (formerly the Catskill Center for Photography). *Silver Sensibilities*, March 20–April 22, 1982
- Providence, Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design. *A Century of Black Photographers, 1840–1960*, March 31–May 8, 1983. Exhibition traveled to: Baltimore Museum of Art, June 12–August 7, 1983; The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, August 20–October 31, 1983; Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C., November 19, 1983–January 15, 1984; The Newark Museum, February 4–April 1, 1984; The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, April 20–June 10, 1984; High Museum of Art, Atlanta, June 29–August 26, 1984. Catalogue
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- Stockholm, Fotografiska Museet in Moderna Museet. *Jazz På Fotografiska*, April 12–August 3, 1986. Catalogue
- New York, The Museum of Modern Art. *Photography Until Now*, February 18–May 29, 1990. Exhibition traveled to The Cleveland Museum of Art, June 27–August 19, 1990. Catalogue
- Boston, Pepper Gallery. *Photogravures*, June 16–July 31, 1993.
- New York, The Museum of Modern Art. *Gesture and Pose: Twentieth-century Photographs from the Collection*, January 13–April 5, 1994
- Kansas City, Missouri, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. *An American Century of Photography: From Dry-plate to Digital*, December 18, 1994–February 19, 1995. Exhibition traveled to: Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, Amherst, Massachusetts, March 10–May 14, 1995; International Center of Photography–Midtown, New York, June 2–September 10, 1995; Auckland City Art Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand, November 15, 1995–February 5, 1996; National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia, March 8–May 6, 1996; Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia, May 17–June 30, 1996; Museum of Photographic Arts, San Diego, August 28–December 1, 1996. Catalogue
- Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kunstbibliothek, Preussischer Kulturbesitz. *American Photography 1890–1965 from The Museum of Modern Art, New York*, April 24–June 12, 1995. Organized by The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Exhibition traveled to: Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, July 3–September 1, 1995; Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh, October 5–November 26, 1995; Hasselblad Center, Göteborg, Sweden, January 6–February 25, 1996; Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, March 19–May 31, 1996; IVAM Centre Julio González, Valencia, June 22–September 15, 1996; Victoria and Albert Museum, London, November 14, 1996–January 26, 1997. Catalogue

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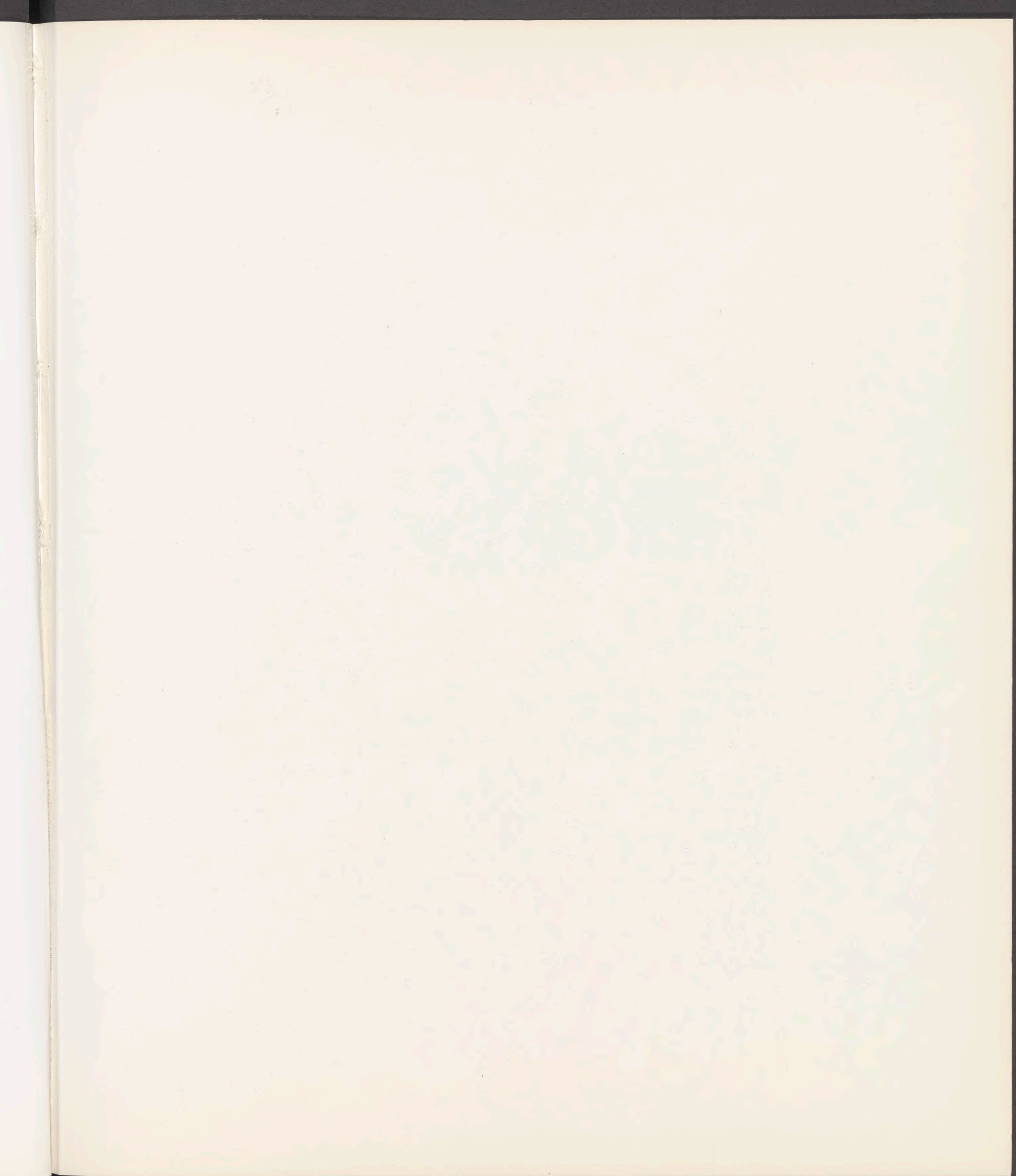
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Roy DeCarava: A Retrospective

PETER GALASSI, WITH AN ESSAY
BY SHERRY TURNER DECARAVA

The nearly two hundred superb plates in this book survey a half-century of work by a great American photographer. First applauded for *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (1955), a book on life in Harlem with text by Langston Hughes, Roy DeCarava is also known for his extraordinary photographs of jazz musicians—Billie Holiday, Milt Jackson, John Coltrane, and many others. A master of poetic contemplation and of sensual tonalities in black and white, DeCarava is, above all, a photographer of people. In his pictures of couples and children, of men at work and protesters on the march, he presents a compelling unity of private feeling and social conviction.

Born in 1919, DeCarava was trained as a painter and printmaker. He turned to photography in the late 1940s and in 1952 won a Guggenheim Fellowship, the first awarded to an African-American photographer. His early photographs of life in Harlem, at once tender and unsentimental, announced a powerful new talent. In 1956 he embarked on an extended series of jazz pictures, which in 1983 was exhibited at The Studio Museum in Harlem as *The Sound I Saw*. In the early 1960s, photographs of workers in New York's garment district and of civil-rights protests brought a new boldness to his work, as his style became leaner without losing

its lyric grace. A life-long New Yorker, DeCarava has almost always worked close to home, making from his own world the expansive world of his art. Since 1975 he has taught photography at Hunter College, where he is Distinguished Professor of Art of the City University of New York.

Published to accompany a major exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, that later will travel to eight leading American museums, *Roy DeCarava: A Retrospective* makes the full range of the artist's work available for the first time. Its exceptional reproductions convey the subtleties of DeCarava's famously rich prints, and its two essays offer a wealth of new information and interpretation. Peter Galassi, Chief Curator at the Museum, traces the evolution of DeCarava's work and career, including such neglected episodes as the pioneering photography gallery he established in the 1950s. Sherry Turner DeCarava, an art historian, curator, and the author of several essays on her husband's work—including that in the Friends of Photography monograph *Roy DeCarava: Photographs* (1981)—offers new insight into its development by reaching back to his earliest artistic efforts, before he turned to photography. She currently serves as Executive Director of The DeCarava Archive.

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